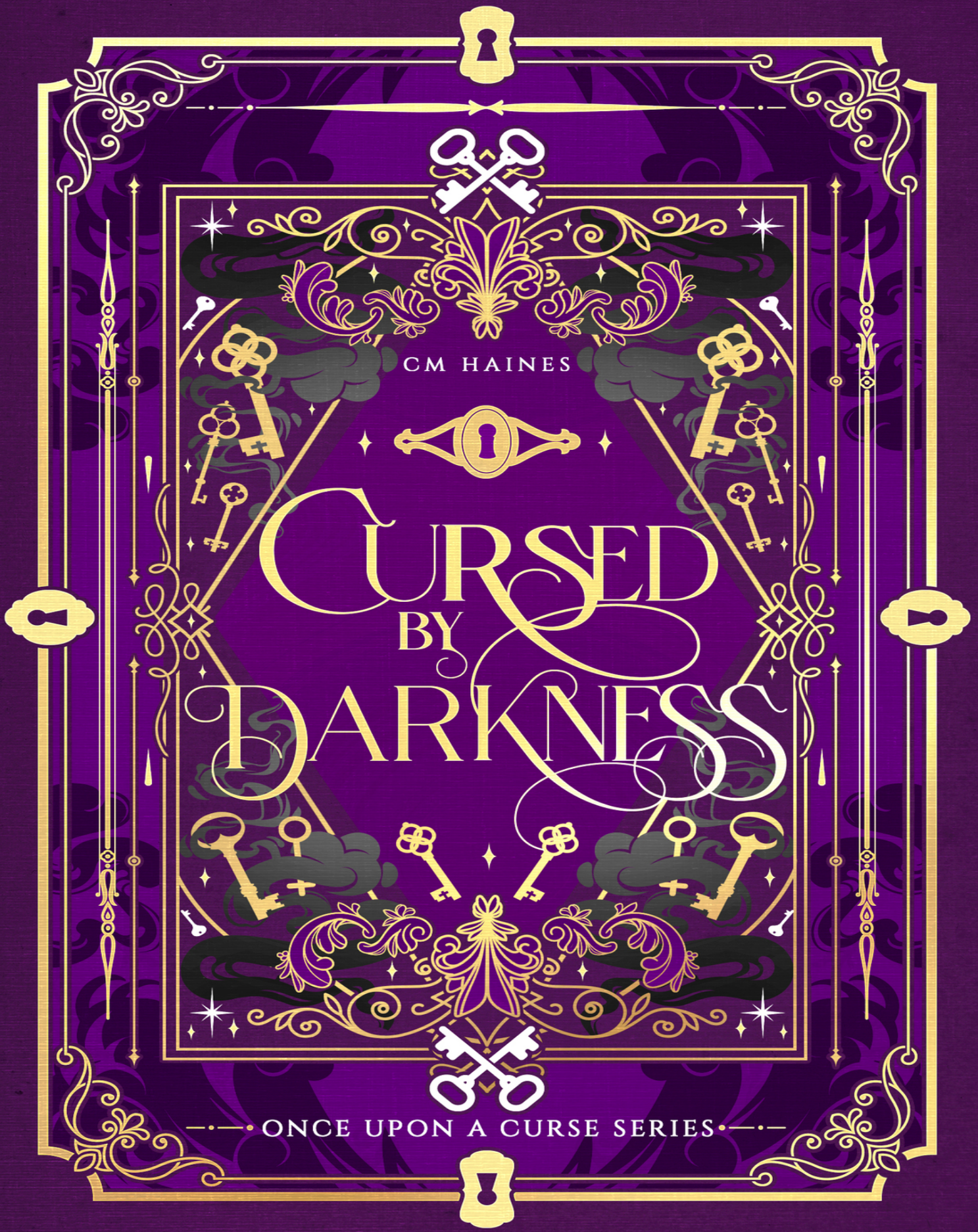
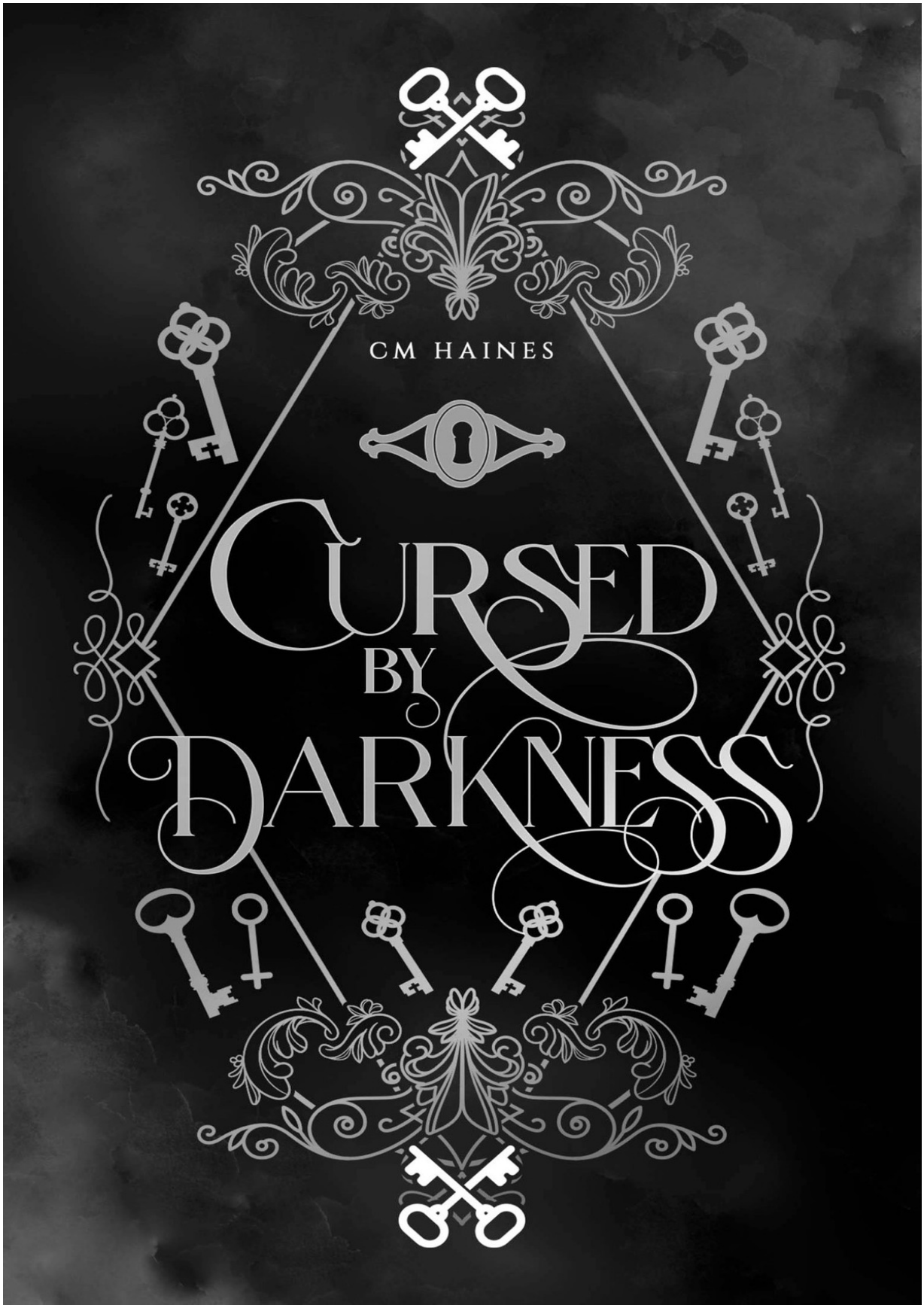

CM HAINES
CURSED BY DARKNESS
ONCE UPON A CURSE SERIES


CM HAINES
CURSED BY DARKNESS

Cursed by Darkness © 2024 CM Haines

All rights reserved under the International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Warning: the unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in prison and a fine of $250,000.

Cover Design: Saint Jupiter
Editor: Rachel Theus Cass
Proofreaders: Leah Miller and Heather Dowell
Interior & Map Design: Cait Marie @Fictional Services

Contents

Content Warnings

1. Juniper
2. Bodin
3. Juniper
4. Bodin
5. Juniper
6. Bodin
7. Juniper
8. Bodin
9. Juniper
10. Bodin
11. Juniper
12. Bodin
13. Juniper
14. Juniper
15. Bodin
16. Juniper
17. Bodin
18. Juniper
19. Bodin
20. Juniper
21. Bodin
22. Juniper
23. Bodin
24. Juniper
25. Juniper
26. Juniper
27. Bodin
28. Juniper
29. Bodin
30. Bodin
31. Juniper
32. Bodin
33. Bodin
34. Juniper
35. Bodin
36. Juniper
37. Bodin
38. Juniper

39. Bodin
40. Juniper
41. The Ombrete
42. Juniper
43. Juniper
44. Bodin
45. Juniper
46. Juniper
Epilogue

The Divine Battle
Pronunciation Guide
Acknowledgments
Also by CM Haines
About the Author

Content Warnings

There are some sensitive themes and topics in this book, and while I tried to approach everything gracefully, I do want to let readers know what to expect.

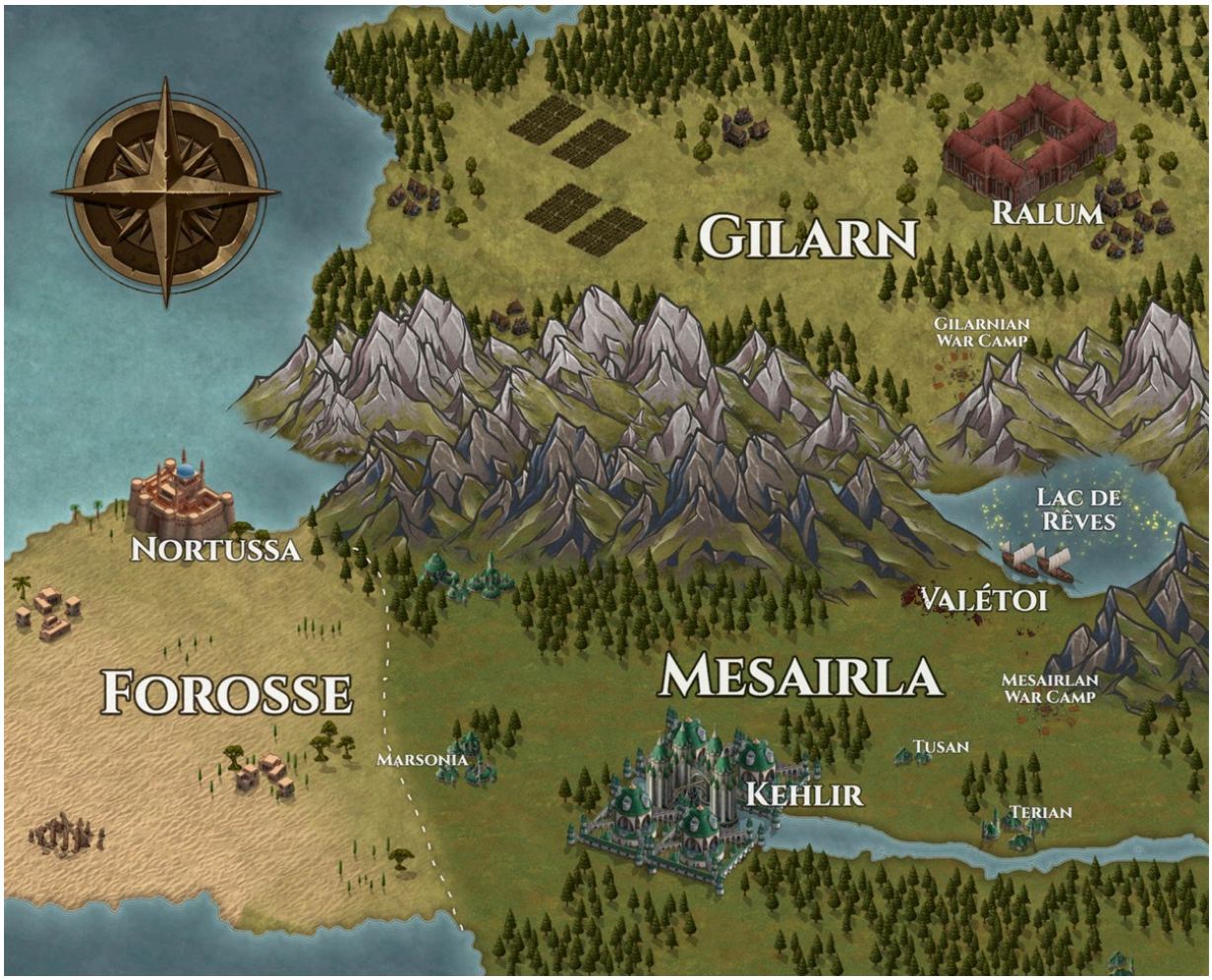
Some of the warnings include: past death of family members (including parents, spouses, and children), grief, depression, neglect, and abandonment.

This is a standalone fantasy romance. However, the epilogue leaves a few things open about side characters to allow for a spin-off seres in the future. No cliffhangers, just… open to possibilities. 😉

If you're concerned or wish to know more about any of the above, please do not hesitate to reach out at cmhaines.author@gmail.com.

To Ali

This book would not be what it is today without you. Because of you, I was able to make this story something I truly love and want to share with the world. For that, I am eternally grateful.


Gilarn
Ralum
Gilarnian
War Camp
Lac de
Rêves
Nortussa
Valétoi
Forosse
Mesairla
Mesairlan
War Camp
Tusan
Marsonia
Kehlir
Terian

ONE

Juniper

When the universe came to be, the King of Gods had three children. The eldest were twins: Theran, the God of Light, and Eryx, the God of Darkness. But it was their sister, Ronna, who truly held the power.

Wringing her hands together, Juniper wondered if it was too late to sneak off, to escape and disappear into this vast foreign kingdom. Surely the gathered crowds around the palace would help her blend in.

Though, the white dress might make that difficult.

She tried to keep the rest of her body still as Nadine—the woman sent to be her new lady's maid—pinned her hair into place. Most of her long blond waves were left down, brushing her lower back, but tiny braids had been twisted in here and there, giving it an intricate, regal look. Nadine had also lined Juniper's green eyes with kohl and painted her lips a light red.

Only Juniper's eldest brother, Raphael, waited in the room with them. He met her gaze in the mirror and gave a small smile. She tried to keep her own in place, but it was difficult when she was on the verge of crying. Not even her mother had come with them, which hurt more than she cared to admit.

"There we go," Nadine said. "Perfect." She had insisted on helping her prepare in the bold styles of Mesairla, but she managed to weave in some elements from Juniper's home, where their preferences leaned toward simple and more conservative. The lacy white dress that had been made and

brought with them from Forosse had been altered to add thin flowing chiffon skirts that were popular here. Her makeup and hair were done to appear natural, but they had been amplified to match the way the people here liked to embellish everything.

From what she remembered of her minimal time visiting this court as a child, everything was so grand here, overdone. She'd dreamt about the open ballroom surrounded by towering columns instead of walls for years. Though, that was about as much as she could recall.

When her father first told her about the arrangement and she voiced her disinterest in marrying a stranger, he had insisted she'd met the then-prince during her visits, as well as his younger brother, who was closer to her age. However, the last time she was here, she had only been six years old, and her not-yet betrothed was over a decade older than her. Not to mention the fact that she hadn't been introduced as the princess. For her safety, while traveling, her parents had always hidden her true identity, making her act as if she were the daughter of a maid instead. She had mostly stayed in the servants' quarters.

Prince Bodin would have been practically an adult when she was here.

King Bodin now. The widowed king everyone feared.

Her stomach churned.

"Can you give us a moment, please?" her brother said, cutting into her spiraling thoughts.

The maid nodded and left them alone, closing the door.

"Juni, what's wrong?" Rafe asked, moving to stand behind Juniper and meeting her gaze in the mirror. His dark attire, pale brown hair, and golden-brown eyes contrasted with her white dress and light coloring.

She scoffed and turned to face him. "What's wrong? Father is making me marry a monster."

"King Bodin isn't a monster. You know better than anyone how stories can be distorted the more they are spread."

Juniper hated when he was reasonable and made sense. It was beyond infuriating. "So, he didn't kill his first two wives?"

"His first wife died giving birth," Rafe said in a soft tone, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I'm not sure what happened to the second, but if he's the man I remember, I don't believe that he killed her. He was quiet and broody, but not a bloodthirsty murderer."

She wanted to believe him, but she was still terrified. “I know this alliance is important, but why do I have to *marry* him? Isn’t there another way? Or can’t it wait a little longer? You know… so I could meet him before walking down the aisle, get to know him.”

Sighing, Rafe pulled her into a hug. With a dozen years between their ages, he had always felt more like a parental figure than a sibling. At twenty-one, she still looked up to him in that way. Especially with how little she saw their mother, father, and the rest of their brothers. Most hadn’t even traveled with them to attend the wedding. Only Rafe and their brother Hugo accompanied her, and the latter barely spoke to her.

Rafe had always been there, looking after her, reading to her, teaching her how to protect herself. Though, his visits to her quarters had been sparse with too much time in between the older she got.

It was going to hurt to say goodbye tomorrow.

“I wish there was another way,” he whispered against the side of her head. “I tried to convince Father to find a different solution, but he refused.”

Because they needed the small fortune he’d traded for her. Her kingdom was struggling immensely, its people starving, so the king had sold his only daughter, his youngest child, the Princess of Forosse, to the one man rich enough to save them.

“Besides,” Rafe went on, “this gets you out of that tower.”

“But how do you know I’m not trading one gilded cage for another?”

He sighed. “I don’t…” He grabbed her bouquet—light pink roses, white lilies, and a variety of flowers in different shades of lavender, intermixed with greenery that cascaded in front of her when she carried it.

“I don’t want to marry a stranger.” She took the flowers then leaned into her brother. “Let alone one so much older than me, who’s already been married twice. Isn’t he older than you?”

“By a couple months, I think.” Regret filled his voice.

“What if…” She swallowed. “What if he expects too much? What if he hurts me?”

Rafe pressed a kiss to her temple. He didn’t respond. Normally, she appreciated him not giving her false promises, but right now, she just wanted her brother to lie and tell her everything would be all right.

“He won’t,” Nadine said as she returned.

Juniper hadn’t heard her enter. Releasing Rafe, she turned toward the woman and glanced at the lace veil in her hands. Nadine gave her a sad

smile. One that told Juniper she understood—as only women of this realm could—that this wasn't her choice. It was comforting, in a way. It reminded Juniper that she wasn't entirely alone. She might not have known this woman before arriving, but she silently thanked the goddess for whomever had assigned Nadine to be her new maid.

Nadine stepped closer to pin the veil in place behind her tiara. "King Bodin is a good man. He might seem intimidating, but he'd never harm a soul outside of battle. He's been through a lot, and as a result, he's built up walls around himself that make him appear distant and uncaring, but it's a façade. He cares more than anyone I've ever met."

"You sound as if you know him well," Rafe said.

She nodded. "My mother has been the head chef down in the kitchens for nearly two decades, and I used to help out as a child. I grew up here in the palace, so I've known him my whole life, and most of us here in Kehlir know he's not the vicious ruler the rest of the realm thinks he is."

That made Juniper feel a little better, but only just. It didn't help the other concerns screaming on a loop in her head.

She was a princess in title only. Her life thus far had been spent confined by the same stone tower walls day after day. And in a few short minutes, she would walk down the aisle to marry a king. By the end of the evening, she would be the Queen of Mesairla.

Remembering that nearly made her sick. She didn't know the first thing about being a queen, despite her own mother being one. Everything she *did* know came from books, fairy tales.

She couldn't even think about what happened after the ceremony. Sharing a bed for the first time, and with a stranger…

She learned about that from books too, as well as whispers from the maids back home. On the way here, Rafe had asked her if their mother informed her of what was to occur, and when she'd told him no, he'd looked like he wanted to jump out of the moving carriage. Eventually, he worked up the nerve to explain it, but Juniper had cut him off with a laugh and said she'd already learned about the basics.

Please stop. I've read the anatomy books and understand the mechanics of it, she'd said, grinning through the underlying fear. His embarrassment and panic had been enough to make her relax for a little while at least.

"Juniper," Rafe said, taking her hand and squeezing. "Take a deep breath."

She followed his instructions and focused on the present. After a couple minutes, Nadine asked, “Are you ready?”

Juniper nodded, unable to speak, and let the maid lower her veil in front of her face. Then, she and Rafe followed her out through the corridor toward the courtyard.

Two of their guards stood just outside. Meeting the eyes of the older one standing nearest to her gave her a semblance of comfort. Richard had been with her most of her life, watching over her and stepping in like a parent when hers avoided her. She spent more time with him than her own family, and she was grateful for his presence here. Even if it was temporary.

“Princess,” he said with a smile.

When she reached for him, he broke protocol to wrap her in a cautious hug.

“You look incredible.” Richard gently pushed her back and tilted her chin up with calloused fingers. He had his own blond hair smoothed back, and his uniform was pristine. But the circles under his dark blue eyes betrayed the exhaustion she also felt from traveling nearly a week to get here and not having much time to rest before the ceremony. She knew, however, that even when this weary, he was still the most capable guard she knew. The only one she fully trusted. He gave a small, understanding nod. “Congratulations, Your Highness. I… met the king earlier, and I think this will be a good match.”

The other guard, who she only barely recognized from their travels, cleared his throat.

Richard rolled his eyes. “Not that it’s my place to tell you such things.”

Juniper chuckled softly and hugged him once more. “Thank you.”

She released him and stepped back, hooking her arm through her brother’s again. Then, she nodded, indicating it was time. She was ready for them to open the doors to the courtyard.

To the man on the other side waiting to become her husband.

TWO

Bodin

For millennia, Theran and Eryx fought amongst the stars. Some claim it was out of jealousy, others say it was because each wanted to take their father's place or earn his praise. The stories are often changed to fit the teller's motif. But the one consistent truth was that they could not agree on anything… save for the love they possessed for their sister.

Every single fiber of Bodin's being wanted to run away. He did not want to be here.

But then again, he didn't want a lot of things.

He stared at his reflection and adjusted his buttons and sleeves for what felt like the hundredth time. His chest was too tight, aching to the point that it was difficult to breathe. Clenching his jaw, he straightened his shoulders and looked down at his immaculate dark waistcoat and breeches.

"It's almost time," Laurent said, joining him in the otherwise empty antechamber. Bodin had kicked everyone out to have a few minutes alone. Of course, his lifelong friend hadn't listened. Stepping closer, Laurent ran a hand through his short, dark blond hair as he looked in the mirror. "You ready for this?"

"You know I'm not." The king sighed and turned away. He went to the drink cart in the corner and poured two glasses of bourbon. Passing one to Laurent, he asked, "Did she get here safely? Everything go all right?"

His friend nodded, grimacing as he took a sip of the liquor. “Her envoy arrived an hour ago. I just saw Nadine in the hallway, and she said the girl will be ready soon.”

The girl. Gods above, she was so young. At twenty-one, she was older than he was during his first wedding, but that had happened not only out of responsibility as heir but out of love and happiness. There would be no such thing with Princess Juniper, and he hated that for her. He knew she hadn’t been given a choice about today. To contribute to that decision made him rage inside, but he was desperate. Along with their princess, the kingdom of Forosse was sending a couple of battalions to aid in the Mesairlans’ fight at the northern border. Without the added troops, they would lose this war soon.

Bodin took a large gulp of his alcohol before asking, “And is she…”

“I don’t know,” Laurent said. “I didn’t see her, and Nadine was in too much of a hurry to talk.”

There had been mixed messages about the Princess of Forosse. Most said the reason her father hid her away all these years was because she was hideous. Others said it was because she was sickly or incompetent. None made him eager to meet her, but for his kingdom, he would do this. He had to; they were out of options. Without the extra soldiers, Bodin’s people would continue to suffer with no end in sight.

“If it’s any consolation, it’s one night.” Laurent took Bodin’s glass with his and set both down before patting him on the shoulder.

“For now,” Bodin said as they headed toward the door. “You know they expect us to produce heirs though.”

Laurent snorted. “So, turn her around and pretend she’s someone else.”

Bodin glared at him.

“It’s going to be fine.” Laurent opened the door. “Worry about that later. Let’s just go meet your new queen.”

New queen. New wife.

One who was never meant to be his.

He was going to be sick. Laurent stopped him before they reached the next set of doors that led to the open courtyard. He was one of the only people who understood exactly what today meant and why it was so difficult. Putting a hand on Bodin’s arm, he whispered, “It will be fine. Just breathe and focus on taking one step at a time.”

Bodin didn't usually let anyone tell him what to do, but in this case, he obeyed. His friend knew him better than just about anyone. Only Nadine rivaled their closeness. She was the closest thing he had to a little sister though, so naturally, he didn't share *everything* with her.

Like how much Bodin thought he was cursed to live alone. Almost everyone he'd ever loved was dead—apart from those two. He didn't want to doom the princess to the same fate. He'd even tried pushing Laurent and Nadine away for their own safety, but neither let him do so. They refused to leave his side, to let him wallow.

"Remember why you're doing this," Laurent said.

"For the men fighting in Valétoi. To protect my people and end this war, once and for all." He'd repeated the words to himself for weeks. They had become his own personal mantra. And now, that had to be enough to get him through this wedding.

With a nod, he pointed to the entrance, signaling for the two guards to open the large oak doors. He and Laurent walked out to the courtyard that had been decorated so elaborately that it looked like a painting from a fairy tale. Small lanterns had been placed among the hanging wisteria and greenery, giving the space an ethereal glow. Flower petals lay scattered down the aisle between the rows of stone benches. They went to the dais at the end, greeting the clergyman before Bodin took a moment to look up at the darkening sky. This courtyard, with its lack of a ceiling, had always been one of his favorite places in the palace.

Behind the older man, the tall, arched windows let in an array of fading light and fresh air. The sun was already starting to set beyond the western forest, and it made the world around them almost golden. It could not have been a more perfect day for a wedding.

If only he was marrying someone he loved. Not that he ever wanted that again. He couldn't handle losing another loved one, so he refused to even be open to that possibility.

But he'd settle for marrying any woman he simply knew at this point. They needed this alliance though. The entire kingdom depended on it.

The southern wall was part of the main palace's structure, keeping it sturdy enough for a balcony to span its length. From there, the sound of violins drifted down to those gathered for the ceremony. Noblemen, courtiers, and staff had been invited, and he'd seen through his bedroom windows this morning that citizens of his kingdom had flooded the streets

of Kehlir. Most of those who resided outside of the capital feared him, but it seemed even they couldn't resist the spectacle. Everyone wanted to see what would happen when the mysterious princess and monstrous king married.

Honestly, he was just as curious.

Beneath the musicians, the rear doors creaked open. A man and woman slowly walked toward them. For a moment, Bodin wondered if the King of Forosse had decided to attend his only daughter's wedding after all, but as they neared, he realized the man was too young to be her father. Bodin hadn't seen the prince in years, and he was looking more like their king the older he got. He'd liked Raphael growing up though, enjoyed his visits from time to time. Where the king was cold and harsh, Prince Raphael was a kind leader.

It didn't matter though. All that mattered was the woman he ushered forward. The one who'd stolen Bodin's attention. Princess Juniper. Her white dress had thin, lacy sleeves that barely covered her shoulders. The front was modest, scooping just low enough to give a peek of her collarbones, but the bodice was tight, showing off her curvy figure. It came to a point below her stomach, as if indicating where this night was meant to lead. The full skirts beneath flowed around her, sweeping away some of the rose petals on the ground.

And a fucking veil covered her face.

He couldn't tell if the stories of her looks were true or false. Though, everything he could see from the neck down made his mouth water. It had been so long since he'd been with a woman apart from the extremely rare late-night trysts. The last of which had been several months ago, and none were in any way meaningful. There was no connection outside of the physical; he'd made sure they always knew that it would only ever be that.

The two reached the bottom of the dais, and Bodin stepped down to escort her the remaining distance. Her brother shook his hand and inclined his head. Bodin dipped his chin as the princess slipped her small hand into the crook of his elbow, and together they walked back up to their places.

The princess let out a soft gasp and glanced around like something was wrong.

"What?" Bodin asked in a hushed tone. "What is it?"

"H-he was supposed to remove my veil before giving me away," she whispered.

Oh. He fought back a nervous laugh. “May I?”

She nodded, and he reached for the edge of the lace to slowly lift it over her head.

All of the air fled his lungs. Even Laurent couldn’t stifle a quiet curse.

Because every single one of those stories had clearly been a lie.

Princess Juniper was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

THREE

Juniper

From the time she came to be, the goddess Ronna knew she was different. Her father tried to instill upon her the importance of power and strength. To teach her that love was nothing but a weakness, he gave her and her brothers a world full of weak humans to control. Never could he have imagined the depths of her compassion toward them, or the lengths she would go to in order to protect them.

In Forosse, weddings were held in ornate sanctuaries and were a very religious event. It was a sacred ceremony, but a small one. Usually, only the families involved and the head of the church attended. Juniper had expected her wedding here in Mesairla to be different, yet nothing could have prepared her for just how incredible it truly was. As the doors opened, music played from somewhere above, and the entire scene before them took Juniper's breath away. Even through her veil, she could see the sheer perfection of this space.

The sun hovered just behind the tall trees in the distance, and lanterns glowed along the greenery. It looked like nature had consumed an ancient throne room. There wasn't a floor or ceiling, but the tall stone walls making up four sides appeared strong and sturdy. The one opposite their entrance had massive arched windows that gave a stunning view of the lakes and rivers the city of Kehlir had been built upon, as well as the forests and mountains in the distance. Except, there didn't appear to be glass in the windows. Everything was open, letting a warm breeze flow through the

space. Crimson flower petals lay scattered on the grass down the aisle between rows of benches full of courtiers she didn't know.

Her eyes snagged on the men waiting at the end of the aisle as her brother led her forward. On a dais before the windows stood an arch made of twisted wood, with vines and more flowers woven throughout. The man in the center looked old enough to be her grandfather, and his long robes told her he was an officiant. But it was the king beside him who grabbed and held her attention.

She understood now why Nadine had said he appeared intimidating, why Rafe had called him broody. King Bodin was a towering man with broad shoulders, inky black hair that flowed in waves to his shoulders, and dark eyes that narrowed in on her as they approached. Even the crown atop his head was made of obsidian. And down the right side of his face, he had three long scars that looked like… claw marks? They started just above his eyebrow and disappeared into his close-cut beard. It was a miracle whatever caused them didn't ruin his eye. Still, scars and all, he was the one of the most attractive men she'd ever seen.

He met them at the foot of the stairs, dipping his head in Rafe's direction. Her brother squeezed Juniper's hand in encouragement before passing her over. As if she were just a prize to be given away. It made her sick. She was the youngest of eight and the only princess, yet she was the first to marry. And it wasn't even her choice… but if this was the way she could help her kingdom, she would do it. The kingdom that never did anything for her, apart from spreading gossip.

Juniper took the king's proffered arm, and he guided her up to begin the ceremony. She glanced over to where Rafe took his seat with their brother Hugo—the only other brother who had come. The rest made excuses not to travel here. Even if it was to see their only sister married off to a foreign king for *their* benefit. She swallowed her rising frustration and grief then once more focused on King Bodin.

Only to realize her vision was still obscured by white lace.

When she gasped, he asked, "What? What is it?"

"H-he was supposed to remove my veil before giving me away," she whispered. She'd been so distracted by the grandeur of the room and her emotions that she had forgotten.

His jaw clenched, as if fighting a scowl. "May I?"

She nodded and was surprised by his gentle movements as he lifted the material up to lay over the back of her head. His dark eyes widened slightly. It took everything she had not to smirk at him. She knew what he was thinking; she'd heard the rumors about herself. Some of them had actually been started by her and one of her maids back home, wanting to see how fast they would spread.

King Bodin visibly swallowed and nodded for the clergyman to start. As the older man spoke, the king took her hands in his much bigger ones. Without the veil, she could really see him. Though, she had to crane her neck to hold his gaze. Her stomach fluttered. He was devastatingly good-looking.

His thumb brushed over her skin, and she realized she needed to pay attention and repeat what the officiant said next. She could have sworn the corner of King Bodin's mouth twitched. Maybe he wasn't fighting a scowl; maybe he was trying not to smile. This man people feared was amused, and that fact alone loosened some of the tension in her shoulder.

The ceremony neared its end, and they were announced husband and wife. She then made her vows as the new queen, and her tiara was replaced with a crown by the clergyman.

"Shit," the king hissed as he tried to catch her falling veil.

She couldn't help but chuckle. A few snickers rang out from the crowd, and she lifted a hand to cover her mouth. The best man stepped forward and took the lace from the king, shaking his head with a grin.

"I'm so sorry," the clergyman said in a hushed tone.

King Bodin waved him off. "It's fine." As he reached to straighten Juniper's crown, he added, "Please continue."

The whole situation surprised her. Surely a monster would have scolded the man for fumbling during such an important ceremony. The king was clearly amused though. Nothing like the man she had heard about over the years. Maybe her brother was right about the stories being similar to the ones about her—all false.

"You may now kiss your wife and queen."

Her smile fell. In the kerfuffle, she'd forgotten the first kiss. King Bodin raised one of his large hands to her cheek and leaned in. Under his breath, he whispered, "I'm sorry."

Before she could wonder about the apology, his lips brushed hers. His other hand slid around her waist, drawing her closer. She shut her eyes just

as the applause started. Despite not wanting this, she couldn't deny the way her body reacted to his touch. He wasn't the first man she'd kissed, but he was the first to spark any sort of true desire. Her heart raced in her chest as she pushed up on her toes to return the kiss.

When the king pulled back, he didn't go far. He held her gaze for one beat, then another. There wasn't anything cruel or malicious there. If anything, he seemed almost kind, and she thought he appeared as sad about this as she felt. For the first time in months, a bit of her fear ebbed away.

"My queen," he said in a soft tone, holding an elbow out. She took a deep breath and slipped her hand around his arm.

They walked down the aisle side by side. Juniper kept her small smile in place, nodding toward those in the crowd. Her husband remained stoic, but she saw him dipping his head in greeting as well. He led her to a small room similar to where she got ready for the ceremony and finally pulled away from her. Wringing her hands together, she watched him pour a glass of something amber, pause, and then pour a second glass. To her surprise, he brought one to her.

"I think we could both use this," he said, his deep voice rumbling.

She took it and hesitated before sipping. Back home, it wasn't proper for a lady to indulge so freely. The king gulped his in one swallow then stared at her with a raised brow. Never one to say no to a challenge, she followed suit. It burned all the way down her throat.

"Fuck," she gasped when she finally managed to take a breath. Her eyes widened, and she slapped a hand over her mouth. She'd picked up the habit of using foul language from her time sneaking around the docks and merchant quarters in Nortussa, but she was usually so careful not to do it elsewhere. "I… I'm so sorry, Your Majesty. I shouldn't—"

"It's fine," he said, grabbing the glass from her to set both on the drink cart and refill them once more. When he handed it back to her, it was with a slight smile. "And please, just call me Bodin."

Juniper stared at him in confusion. "But that's…"

"I know Forosse is more formal and proper." He sipped at his liquor this time. "But here, we don't use titles with family or friends. And you, my dear wife, are now family."

There was something in the way he said *my dear wife* that sounded like sarcasm, almost like he was teasing her. But not in a cruel way. Quite the opposite, actually. It was as if he knew she didn't want this, and he didn't

either. Yet, they were both here, doing what they must for the sake of their kingdoms.

She had rarely used first names throughout her life. Her mother had never addressed her father so informally, so Juniper had assumed that was always how it was between a king and queen, or a husband and wife. The only people Juniper called by name were her brothers and Richard, the latter of whom had insisted after of being her head guard when she was a child. And that was still difficult, despite him being like a father figure and her only real friend left in the world other than Rafe.

Taking another big drink, she decided to stop dwelling. She wasn't in Forosse anymore. She was no longer trapped in that goddessforsaken tower. And unless this king intended on locking her up just the same, this was her chance at a semblance of freedom. She was starting a new life here, and she would adapt to their ways. She would not waste this opportunity to find a shred of happiness outside of the shadows that had kept her hidden most of her life.

With a more genuine smile, she said, "Then, you may call me Juniper."

FOUR

Bodin

For a time, the three celestial siblings coexisted in a fragile peace. Theran and Eryx, however, were discontented to share this world. They each wanted full power over the lands and people. Their light and dark magic constantly at battle was what created night and day as we know it.

The look on Juniper's face when they entered the ballroom for the celebration after the vows and coronation made Bodin glad he'd let Nadine do what she wanted with the planning. He had wanted to have a small, quiet ceremony, something closer to what they would have expected in Forosse not just to comfort the princess, but because he hadn't wanted to face all of these other people. It only served as a reminder of everyone who was missing tonight. His parents. His brother, Elias.

Elias should be here. Not him.

His brother had died before Bodin's first wedding, but it never got easier. Not really. He missed his younger brother so much that his chest physically hurt.

So, he'd let Nadine plan this entire evening because he couldn't bear to think about it any longer than necessary. When she suggested having the wedding on Unity Day—the holiest, most-celebrated holiday in Forosse—Bodin couldn't say no. Then, she insisted on an elaborate celebration to impress their allies. He'd thought sending them coins, jewelry, and other

riches was enough. Now, he was grateful for his friend's stubborn determination simply because of his new wife's reaction.

The fact that most of her family was also absent saddened him, making him even more glad he could make this day special for her in his own way.

Juniper snapped her mouth shut but continued looking around. The ballroom was almost the exact opposite of the courtyard, with its walls made only of towering columns that let in natural air. Looking out past the columns provided an enchanting view of the stars twinkling over the lake that nearly reached the gardens just outside the ballroom. Their shoes clicked on the marble floor as they headed toward their raised table where it sat on one side of the large room. Juniper tipped her head back, taking in the ornate ceiling nearly three stories above them.

"This *place*," she said, her voice full of awe as she stared at the painted clouds and hanging chandeliers.

He stopped her before she could stumble on the stairs up to their platform. "Watch your step."

"Sorry." She looked down at her feet as they continued up to the table full of food awaiting them. "It's just…"

When she trailed off, he said, "Yeah, it is."

Compared to Forosse, he knew it was a lot.

"I remember seeing this ballroom, but it was in the daytime. And my memory paled in comparison," she said as he helped her into the high-backed chair next to his.

Bodin's brow furrowed as he sat beside her. "Wait, what do you mean? You've been here?"

Juniper reached for her wine goblet. "I came as a child a couple of times." Before he could ask how they'd never met, she smiled at him, making his pulse race. She really was stunning, and in their brief time speaking, he'd seen a spark of fire within her that intrigued him. "My parents decided at an early age to keep me hidden from the world. Hence the stories you've likely heard about me. They allowed me to travel with them here twice when I was young, but I stayed with one of the maids, pretending to be her daughter."

"Why did—" His question was cut off by Laurent clapping him on the shoulder.

"I think it's time for a toast, Your Majesty," he said.

Bodin nodded, barely refraining from showing his annoyance at being interrupted. Despite not wanting to let Juniper in, he wanted to learn more about her. It was as if he couldn't stop himself. He especially wanted to know why she was kept locked in that tower for so long when none of her brothers had been treated the same.

Sighing, he pushed to his feet and waited for the room to quiet down. Once it did, he picked up his goblet. "Thank you for joining us on this wonderful day. The alliance between Mesairla and Forosse on its own is a reason to celebrate." He put his free hand on Juniper's shoulder. "But the fact that I was given the opportunity to marry their beautiful, kind, smart princess and make her my queen has brought me so much joy and hope for the future. I'm grateful to have someone to spend the rest of my life with.

"We do not typically observe Unity Day here, but our Forossan guests do. For our wedding to take place on this holy day is an honor, and I hope it will grant us peace together." He lifted his wine. "To a long and prosperous union."

"Long live the king," the crowd cheered. "Long live the queen."

Knowing what they wanted next, he leaned over, tipped Juniper's face up, and kissed her briefly. She hid her shock well, but he still caught it, along with the sweet blush now staining her cheeks. Straightening, he said, "Please enjoy the food and music!"

On cue, the musicians began playing a slow melody. People returned to their mingling, most heading to the tables around the edges of the room. Many went to dance in the center.

Prince Raphael and Prince Hugo joined them at the high table, and Bodin shook both of their hands. Juniper stood and hugged the eldest. It didn't escape his notice that she started toward Hugo but stopped herself. The youngest prince looked so much like his sister that they could have been twins, though he knew Hugo was a few years older than her. His pale blond hair was cropped close to his head, and he had the same bright green eyes. But there was something in his gaze that differed tremendously. Juniper appeared light and happy, even if she didn't truly want all of this, but her brother seemed angry, bitter.

"I hope you two enjoy your evening," Bodin said, brushing past the strange tension between the siblings. "And I hope you know you're welcome to stay as long as you'd like. I know how difficult it is to be

separated from loved ones, so I want to make sure your family knows my doors are always open to them. Please visit Juniper as often as you wish."

"Thank you," Raphael said with a smile for his sister. "I will try to come as often as I can get away. And perhaps tomorrow we can discuss a plan for our men to join yours in the valley. I know it might seem too soon, but we were hoping to begin our journey home right away."

Bodin glanced at Juniper, whose eyes had shifted to those dancing. "Yes, tomorrow. Right now, however, I want to dance with my new wife."

Seemingly surprised, she looked from her brothers to him. He held out a hand, but she glanced toward Raphael again, as if asking for permission. When Raphael nodded, she took Bodin's hand, letting him lead her down the stairs to the dancefloor, where he twirled her into his arms. Her grin brightened the room. A part of him wanted to continue making her smile, even while the rest of him ached in grief. Her awe and sweet disposition reminded him of Elias. She was close in age to how old his brother would have been if he'd still been alive. And he couldn't help but think about how his brother would have been a much better match for this lively, sweet woman.

Clearing his throat, he focused on the present. "Juniper?"

"Yes, Yo—Bodin?"

The corner of his mouth curled up. "I'm your husband."

Her brow furrowed, creating an adorable crinkle in her forehead. "I'm aware. I was at the ceremony, believe it or not."

He couldn't help but chuckle. This woman had a boldness to her that he hadn't expected. In his experience, and based on what he'd heard from others, Forossan women were usually so reserved and demure. "My point is that you no longer need your brothers' or father's permission for anything."

The fact that she did back home made his blood boil. The customs and beliefs of that kingdom would never make sense to him.

"You do not need mine either," he added as he leaned in closer. "If you wish to dance, dance."

Her steps faltered, and he tightened his hold on her, keeping her steady and stopping their movements. He tried to ignore the way she fit perfectly against him. The top of her blond head didn't even reach his chin, but it felt as if she belonged in his arms.

He shut down that line of thinking immediately.

Tears lined her eyes. "I… I don't understand. You *bought* me…"

Bodin clenched his jaw and took a couple of deep breaths to calm himself before he did something stupid, like march over to her brothers and show them why people feared him.

Taking her hand again, he led her off the dance floor and out to the garden just beyond. It was quieter here, more private, but he still kept his voice low as he faced her. “Let me make this perfectly clear: I did not *buy* you. I do not *own* you, Juniper. *No one* does. I paid your father for his army, for help with this never-ending war in the north.”

“Then, why am I here?” she asked as two guards took up spots a few paces away.

Did she truly not know? Did she not remember? He wished he had an answer that wouldn’t hurt her, but he didn’t. Still, he found himself only giving her part of the truth. “Your father offered you to me because he knows I’m in need of an heir.”

There was no need to upset her more tonight. Bodin would explain later, when they had privacy and a moment to breathe. She visibly swallowed and turned toward the calm lake.

“I know this wasn’t your choice,” he whispered, “but I think I can offer you what no one else ever has.”

“What?” Pain filled her voice, and he hated it. He didn’t know this woman, but he had the power to give her a good life, and he planned on doing what he could to make her happy.

Someone ought to.

“Freedom.”

Her head whipped toward him. She seemed to hesitate before slowly asking, “What do you mean?”

“Like I said, I don’t own you. You’re free to make your own decisions, go where you want, do whatever you wish. I just have a couple of requests.”

“And what are those?”

“Do not take another lover until after we’ve conceived at least one child. I don’t want there to be any questions about their bloodline.”

Her eyes widened, but she nodded, even as her cheeks flushed pink under the moonlight.

“And if you leave the palace, please take your guards,” he said. “At least a couple of them. It’s peaceful here in the capital, for the most part, but you should take them just in case.”

“I’m allowed to leave the palace?” The hope in her voice almost broke him, while also making him angry, not at his new wife, but at the people who made something so simple seem like such a big thing to her.

Bodin barely stifled a frustrated sigh. “Whenever you’d like. Though, if you plan to go far, or for more than a day, I’d like to know so that I don’t send out troops searching for you.”

Her soft red lips curled into a smile. “Deal.”

“Good. Then, shall we return? I’m afraid our courtiers will not let us stay out here alone for long. We need to mingle, let you meet them—”

“And dance?”

He slowly entwined their fingers. “And dance.”

Together, they headed back into the celebration. He knew his people watched them, wanting to see how he reacted to everything, but his attention was solely on Juniper as they joined the dancing once more. His queen.

His third chance.

Bodin paced back and forth across the plush rug in front of the fireplace. He was just about to go make sure everything was all right when a soft knock sounded on the door connecting his room to the adjoining smaller bedroom for the queen. The tradition of having two separate rooms went back generations, but his parents and grandparents before them hadn’t used the queen’s chambers. They hadn’t needed to. But Bodin had it prepared for Juniper so that she had her own space if she wanted it.

The door opened, and Juniper peeked her head in. “Should I…”

“Yes, please, come in,” he said.

She walked in, her hands clenching and unclenching at her sides. The silk nightgown she’d changed into made his mouth water. It left little to the imagination. The bottom of her hem brushed her mid-thigh, the tight bodice and low neckline exposing the tops of her breasts. Her hair had been let down entirely, the long blond waves falling over one shoulder. She’d washed the makeup from her face, but she didn’t need it. She was breathtaking.

His pulse quickened, sending all of his blood south. At least one thing was certain; he wouldn't need to pretend she was anyone else.

Guilt coursed through him at the thought. Juniper wasn't his. This wasn't supposed to be her life.

But there was no turning back now. They were in this—together, he hoped. Keeping his duty in mind, he waited for her to approach and said, "You look incredible."

"Thank you." Pink tinged her cheeks just as they had during the reception, and he realized how much he enjoyed seeing her blush.

He lifted a palm to one side of her face, brushing his thumb across her smooth skin. Her breath hitched. As he stepped closer, she bit at her lower lip. That was when he noticed she still wouldn't meet his gaze.

"Look at me, Juniper," he whispered.

When she did, his heart sank. Her green eyes were glossy, rimmed with tears. But it wasn't just nerves he saw.

She was terrified.

Not only terrified, but in this moment, he remembered that she was just a girl. A sheltered one, at that. She might have been twenty-one, but she was clearly inexperienced.

It wasn't as if this was the first time a person had cowered from him in fear, and it wouldn't be the last. Whether it was because of the stories or the scars, he wasn't sure. Most likely a combination.

No matter the reason, she had never seen the ugly truths of the world. She'd spent most of her life in a godsforsaken tower.

And he wasn't going to be the one to force everything onto her at once.

Bodin released her and walked away, decision made. Grabbing the dressing robe from the wardrobe, he turned back to find her beside the bed. She was practically shaking as she asked, "Do you w-want me to l-lie down?"

"No." Bodin crossed to her, but when she flinched, he froze. Still a few feet away, he held open the robe. "Can I put this around you?"

She stared at him in confusion but nodded. As he helped her into it, she said, "I d-don't understand what's h-happening."

"Nothing is happening." He gently pulled her long locks out of the fabric. "Not tonight."

"Wh-what do you mean? We h-have to. Th-they said I had to… to be ready for you a-at all times."

His earlier lust turned to anger. “Who told you that?”

Juniper visibly swallowed. “A b-book. It said it was a wife’s duty. And y-you said it yourself; I’m here to give—to give you heirs. And I know I’m to s-serve your needs as well. I didn’t mean to… to make you not want me. I know I w-wasn’t supposed to show you my fear, but I’ve n-never… I…”

Her rambling was sort of cute, but regardless, it broke his heart. It also made it more evident just how inexperienced she was. He put a finger under her chin. “We don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for.”

“But don’t we… don’t we *have* to c-consummate the marriage?”

Technically, yes. But he didn’t say that. “I can tell the council it was done. They don’t have to know what we really did or didn’t do in the privacy of this room.”

“Don’t they… check?” She pulled away from him, a little of that ire he’d seen before returning to her tone.

He almost laughed until he realized she was serious. “No. What the fuck? Do they still do that in Forosse?”

Not waiting for an answer, he went to grab the bourbon Laurent had brought him earlier. He needed it now.

“Don’t talk about my home like that,” she said, following him, her tone going from nervous to indignant at the inferred insult. She ripped the glass from his hand and gulped down the fiery liquor. “I don’t know how they d-do things here.” Her nervous stutter had almost completely vanished as anger replaced it. “I was kept a secret, locked away for most of my life. All I know is what I’ve been told, what I’ve overheard, or what I’ve read. So, I’m sorry for my ignorance, but you don’t have to be patronizing.”

He watched her rant in amazement. She was small but feisty. His attention drifted to her lips before he could stop it.

“Really?” she asked in an incredulous tone.

Bodin groaned, realizing he was caught, and shoved a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry. All right? I wasn’t trying to upset you; you just surprised me. I didn’t realize that practice still existed.” He poured more bourbon and took a long drink before giving the rest to her. “No one will check for proof.”

“But they’ll still know.”

“No, they won’t. They won’t examine you. They only need verbal confirmation.”

She stared at him like he was mad. Setting the glass down, she walked back over to the tall four-poster bed and sat on the edge. “Fine, but do you think the maids won’t gossip about the lack of blood on the sheets after my supposed first time?”

Her bluntness was oddly refreshing. She was right though.

“Not everyone bleeds, but…” He scratched at his jaw while moving toward her, trying to come up with a way to assure her it would be fine. It practically smacked him in the face. “Nadine. She’ll be helping you dress and such in the morning, so I’ll make sure she’s the only one who comes in. I’ll have her clean the room and take the sheets as if they’re soiled. She won’t say anything.”

“You trust her that much?” Juniper asked.

“I’d trust her with my life,” he said without hesitation. She was like a sister to him. “Everything will be fine. I do need heirs, but not immediately. We can take things slow, get to know each other.”

She looked like she wasn’t sure whether to believe him. Honestly, he didn’t blame her. They were strangers to one another. And it sounded like she’d been treated more like a prisoner than a protected princess.

He leaned against the bed next to her, wanting to offer some sort of comfort. “We do not view marriage the same way as your kingdom, Juniper. You are not here to serve me. You will stand at my side as my queen.”

Her mouth parted, and she looked like she was about to cry again. “Truly?”

“I swear. We won’t do anything you don’t want to do.” He stepped in front of her. “I’ll even sleep in the attached room if it makes you more comfortable and give you this bigger bed. I know you didn’t choose this, and I refuse to force you to—”

She hopped off the bed and wrapped her arms around his middle. He let out a breath, hesitantly returning the embrace.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Bodin smiled against the top of her head. He’d meant every word.

He had told his closest friends he didn’t want to get married again, but now, having met this woman… there was something about her. Something that made him want to protect her and give her the chance to be happy.

Something that made him want to let her in.

Even when his heart screamed to keep her out.

FIVE

Juniper

After centuries of enduring the twins' wrath against one another, Ronna erected a massive chain of mountains to separate the main continent, giving each brother half to control and leaving none for herself.

A stream of sunlight awoke Juniper with a start. She sat upright, trying to figure out where she was as she glanced around the unfamiliar room.

"Good morning, Your Majesty," a voice said.

Juniper tugged the blankets around her chest. The bed was empty beside her, but the night before came crashing back in. Her head throbbed with the aftereffects of so much alcohol.

She married the King of Mesairla yesterday. Last night was their wedding night, but he hadn't shared her bed. Instead, they sat near the fire talking and drinking. He'd helped her stumble over to his bed when she could barely keep her eyes open, then he went into the adjoining room to sleep separately.

But it appeared like he'd moved around the blankets and pillows beside her to look like they'd slept together.

She quickly focused on the woman pouring buckets of steaming water into the tub that sat up on a raised platform in the corner—the one she hadn't even noticed the night before. *Nadine*. Juniper relaxed slightly.

"I had help bringing up water for a bath, but then I told them I would handle getting you prepared for the day." The lady's maid gave her a

pointed look. “They know the morning after your first night together can be a little rough, and most women would understand if you were too embarrassed to have so many care for you. No one questioned my order.”

“Thank you,” Juniper whispered. She glanced at the door connecting the two rooms. The smaller one was meant to be hers, but he’d insisted on her taking the larger bed, claiming it was more comfortable. And he wasn’t wrong. She was deeply attached now and didn’t want to trade back.

“He’s already gone,” Nadine said, pouring rose oil into the water. Juniper didn’t know what time it was, but looking out the tall arched windows that made up an entire wall of their bedroom, she would guess it was still fairly early in the morning. Yet, Nadine appeared as if she had been awake and working for a while. Her curly black hair was tied into a bun on top of her head, with wisps falling down to frame her angular face, and the sleeves of her maroon dress had been pushed up past her elbows.

The scent of roses immediately reached Juniper, and she smiled. Then, the woman’s words registered. “They won’t think it strange he left me so early?”

Nadine walked down the few steps to the main floor then went to the wardrobe and pulled out a light mauve dress. She draped it over the end of the bed before gathering the other items Juniper would need. “We’re at war, Your Majesty. Everyone knows how vital it is that he discusses plans with your brothers while they’re here.”

Your Majesty. It was so strange to be referred to that way.

Juniper slipped out of the bed as she nodded. Now that she wasn’t panicking or distracted, she could really appreciate her surroundings. Last night, she’d seen the cavernous bedroom in the flickering firelight and lamps, but during the day… it was breathtaking.

Similar to where the wedding ceremony took place, the arched windows didn’t have glass. Everything in this palace seemed so open, as if they wanted to remain connected to nature while still having shelter. A wide, cushioned bench sat below the nearest windows, and one of the arches, she realized, was a doorway that led to a massive balcony with its own sitting area. And despite the walls and furniture being mostly shades of dark gray, it felt light in here.

“Let’s get you into the tub, then I’ll gather the sheets,” Nadine said, moving a screen around the bathing area for privacy in case anyone else entered.

Juniper followed the curved stone stairs up to the raised platform, where she undressed, stepped into the massive tub, and lowered until the hot water reached her shoulders. It soaked into her skin, relaxing her tense muscles as she stared out at the dark mountains in the distance. While Nadine went toward the bed, Juniper dipped under the surface to wet her hair. It had been too long since she'd been able to truly feel so at ease. For months, she'd feared her wedding night. Now that it was over and she knew her husband had no intention of forcing her into anything or harming her, she could finally breathe. Not that she entirely trusted him, of course. He was still a stranger, after all. But she wanted to believe he was genuine, especially after chatting for so long the previous night. She couldn't quite remember every detail they'd shared, but she knew she'd told him about her tower, her brothers, and her favorite books. He, in turn, had talked about his family, the parts of the palace and city she should visit, and a little about his first two wives.

A warm breeze brushed across her face and shoulders, and she smiled. She'd dreaded coming here, but she couldn't help but hope he'd spoken the truth about her freedom.

"There really isn't any blood," Nadine whispered, drawing Juniper's attention across the room. "He said there wasn't, that was why he asked me to do this alone, and of course, not everyone bleeds, but there's nothing to clean up…"

Just like that, Juniper straightened. "He said you would be discreet."

The maid's eyes snapped to her. "Oh. Yes, of course. I'm not judging or anything. It's not as if he doesn't have a past too."

Juniper sucked in a breath as understanding hit her. "No, I don't have—I've never—we just didn't…"

"Whoa, slow down. What?" Nadine crossed the room to her. "I thought he meant… You two didn't consummate the marriage?"

"Shh!" She looked around, nervous another person might hear, but they were utterly alone. Still, her stomach twisted. She should have kept that to herself. She couldn't force out more than a whisper when she said, "Bodin said he trusted you with his life. I assumed you knew."

"*Bodin*." The woman smiled. "I thought Forossans didn't use first names outside of childhood and behind closed doors with loved ones?"

"Sometimes, not even then," she said before she could help it, remembering the way her mother always addressed her father as *Your*

Majesty or *My King*, even when not in the public eye. Juniper cleared her throat. “He asked me to call him that.”

“I’ll bet he did.” Nadine smirked as she grabbed a vial and opened it. She poured its contents into her hands then worked the sweet-smelling soap into Juniper’s hair. “Your secrets are safe with me, Your Majesty. I’ve been friends with the king my whole life and would do just about anything for him.”

Something like jealousy flared to life in Juniper’s chest.

She must have made a face because Nadine chuckled and said, “Territorial about the man you met yesterday?”

Juniper didn’t answer, instead turning her attention back to the nearest tall window to stare at the brilliant blue skies and white puffy clouds stretching out before her. She couldn’t stop thinking about Nadine’s reaction. The woman was surprised they hadn’t consummated the marriage. Juniper had seen the way he looked at her last night, and she caught him staring at her lips, but he’d still turned her away. Maybe she’d read him wrong. Was there something wrong with her?

Nadine pivoted to kneel beside her. “I have a feeling we’re going to be spending a lot of time together, so I’m going to be open with you. You have nothing to be jealous about.” When Juniper tried to deny it, Nadine held up a hand. “Even if you don’t feel it now, I have no doubt you’ll grow to at least care for Bodin; it’s hard not to. But I promise you nothing has ever happened between us, and nothing ever will. He’s like a brother to me. There are zero feelings beyond familial love.”

Juniper didn’t know this woman. She didn’t know her past or behavior, but she wanted to believe her too. It might have been naïve or foolish. Starting a new life without anyone in her corner, without any friends, however, seemed like a worse alternative. Besides, everyone deserved a chance to prove themselves. She didn’t like to assume people were dishonest or bad.

“All right.”

Nadine stood, resumed her spot behind Juniper, and began rinsing the soap from her hair. “Good. Now, let’s get you ready for breakfast, Your Majesty.”

“Juniper.”

The woman froze.

Juniper turned to look at her with a smile. “If we’re going to be spending so much time together, like you said, you should just use my name. That’s what friends do here, right?”

Grinning, Nadine said, “Right.”

She relaxed back into the bath as Nadine continued helping her wash. It was so peaceful here. They had only walked up two flights of stairs to reach the bedroom last night, but with how layered the city of Kehlir was, it felt like she was much higher in the sky. None of the noise from the streets below reached them in this place.

All at once, reality hit her. She was no longer locked in her familiar tower, but she’d been left alone in a similar situation. Her pulse quickened as she fought to remain calm. Bodin had told her she was free, but how did she know that for certain?

“Once we’ve got you dressed and ready for the day, Bodin will meet you downstairs for breakfast,” Nadine said. “He assigned one of his guards —Samuel—to accompany you and your personal guard to show you the way. And then, I think Laurent will be with you for a while to escort you around.”

Juniper’s mind reeled. “I don’t understand… I’m allowed to leave this room? And who’s Laurent?”

To her surprise, Nadine looked sad as she put a hand on Juniper’s arm where it lay on the edge of the tub. “Bodin has informed us that you are welcome to come and go as you wish. Laurent is his best friend; they’ve been inseparable since before I was even born.” Her soft chuckle put Juniper more at ease. “He was standing with Bodin during the ceremony.”

“Oh. Right.” She’d met so many people since arriving in this kingdom yesterday that she couldn’t recall most of their names.

“He’s lived here since he was around seventeen. His family were nobles and had been an active part of this court—hence his long friendship with Bodin—but then, Laurent’s parents died of fever. So, Bodin convinced his own to take him in.” Nadine grinned. “He’s a lot to handle, but he’s sweet and loyal.”

“What do you mean by ‘a lot to handle’?”

A huff of air burst from Nadine’s nose in amusement. “I think you need to experience it to understand. He likes to joke around, tease, and flirt with everyone, but just remember that he means it in jest.”

Juniper shook her head, a slow grin forming on her lips. Maybe this place wouldn't be so bad after all.

Sneaking around the castle back home had been a regular pastime. After realizing that the tower would be her life for the rest of her days, Juniper had been desperate to find a way in and out. She'd made a game out of getting by the guards unnoticed. She could now navigate those halls blindfolded, if she dared, and still not be caught.

But the Mesairlan palace was essentially new to her. After Nadine helped her dress, she braided and pinned parts of Juniper's hair, once again leaving most of it hanging in neat waves down her back. It was so different compared to the plain updos in Forosse, and the dress exposed far more of her body than she was used to, but she found herself smiling in the mirror as she took in her reflection. She liked the styles here, even though the thought of walking around like this made her blush. The slits on either side of the skirt reached her thigh, high enough that each step revealed her bare legs. And the corset beneath pushed her breasts up, creating what would have been considered scandalous cleavage back home.

No one but maids had ever seen this much of her. At least, not before last night when Bodin watched her walk into the room wearing that short nightgown.

And then, slept in another bed.

Taking a deep breath, she thanked Nadine for helping her. She wouldn't worry about that right now. She wanted to explore her new home and enjoy her newfound freedom.

Juniper followed her out into the hallway, forgoing protocol. Two guards waited outside the door to escort her down to the dining hall. She had to hold back a laugh as Nadine walked away, clearly confident that Juniper would go directly where she was supposed to with ease. The woman would learn soon enough that it took more than just a couple of guards to ensure she didn't run off. Especially when one of the two waiting was her favorite, a man she knew better than her own family. He was all too aware of her escape tendencies.

“Good morning, Richard,” she said with a grin. She dipped her chin toward the other in greeting.

“Samuel, Your Majesty,” the second man said, inclining his head.

“It’s nice to meet you, Samuel.”

He then led her down the hall while Richard walked beside her. The older man had been a guard for the Forossan royal family since before she was born, and he’d been with her specifically since she was a toddler. It was nice seeing a familiar face this morning.

She *almost* felt bad when they reached the lower level of the palace and she took off down a side hallway.

“I’m getting too old for this, Juniper Nichole!” He shouted for her to stop, running after her, exasperation and something akin to expectation evident in his voice, but she ducked into an alcove. When he and the younger guard rushed past, she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. Counting to three in her head, she peeked out and then hurried in the direction they’d come from.

Richard was used to her antics, and she expected a lecture later, especially with them being in an unknown place. But right now, she wanted to explore her new home. And she didn’t want a formal tour or to be escorted. She just wanted to look around, get a lay of the land. To experience it herself.

The next hall she entered wasn’t as grand as the main foyer, but it was even more beautiful. It was almost a perfect blend of the courtyard and ballroom they had used the night before. One entire side was made up of open arches, with vines wrapped around the columns and a wrought iron railing that spanned the distance. A stream trickled beneath, and she gasped at the clear glass floor that let her see the water and fish swimming below her feet.

“This place is magical,” she whispered to herself, reaching a sitting area that jutted out from the center of the pathway over the water. She made a mental note to remember the way here. It was the perfect little spot for reading and relaxing. No one else was around; it was the most serene place she’d ever seen.

Curious about what other wonders existed here, Juniper continued on. The other end opened to another grand hall, but this one was filled with statues and busts of historical figures, both real and mythical. Paintings of

various sizes covered the tall white walls. She turned on the spot, grinning like a child who'd been granted her most outlandish wish.

She would miss Rafe, as well as a few of her maids, but she wouldn't miss her secret life or how she rarely saw anyone else. The way her mother's visits to her rooms had become less frequent over the years, and her father's had stopped altogether. This was a fresh start. One that was turning out better than she could have ever dreamed.

It felt too good to be true. A new fear trickled in, making her wonder if the niceties would end as soon as her brothers left. Bodin and Nadine seemed genuine, but it wasn't like she had a lot of experience with people who kept their word.

She couldn't dwell on that though. For now, she just wanted to enjoy it all. A single day at a time.

Turning down one of the hallways branching off of what had to be the art gallery, she found a relatively plain corridor, at least in comparison to what she'd seen so far. It was still beautiful, with sconces lighting up the rich wooden paneling and marble floor. Half a dozen doors lined the way, and curiosity got the best of her. She went to the one at the end and turned the knob slowly.

And found it unlocked.

Juniper glanced around to make sure she was still alone before pushing it open. Descending stairs greeted her, and she hesitated for only a second. The stone spiral stairway had the same sconces from the corridor, but these were spaced farther apart, sending her into darkness every ten steps or so. Still, the light gave her more courage than she should have had while wandering underground in the palace of a foreign kingdom.

She wasn't sure how far down she'd traveled, but by the time her feet hit the solid floor at the bottom, she was chilled to the bone. The cold didn't faze her though. Not as she saw what awaited her.

The stairs opened to a vast round room with several circular doors. She stepped into the center of the spiral-patterned stone floor and twirled around slowly to count. Twelve. There were twelve of the tall ornate doors, each uniquely carved and embellished. Stonework lined the edges of a few, others had greenery. Everything about them gave off an otherworldly feeling.

It was… she didn't even know. She'd never seen anything like it.

Unable to resist, she went to the first one on the left when facing the stairs. The top of the arch frame was far above her head, nearly double her height. Its large knob sat right in the center of the gray wood. She reached for it and turned, but it wouldn't budge. For a moment, she thought she smelled flowers. Like the carved flora on the door actually had a scent. She tried opening it again, then the next one. Door after door, she moved around the room, trying to find one that was unlocked.

As she reached for the tenth one, a deep voice said, "Get lost?"

Juniper whirled, her heart pounding in her chest, to find Bodin's best man. *Laurent*, she remembered Nadine saying. She swallowed and glanced around. All of the doors were locked in this underground room far from where anyone would stumble across it. She knew she wasn't supposed to be here.

"I…" Did she pretend she was lost, as he'd asked, or should she admit to exploring like Bodin said she could? How much would she be punished for evading her guards and being in a place she was clearly not meant to find? Would this man harm her here where no one could hear her screams, or would he bring her to Bodin so he could take care of her? Would she be punished? Lose that promised freedom? A thousand questions raced through her head.

"Easy," the man said, hands up in front of him, as if sensing her rising panic. "Calm down. It's all right."

"I'm sorry." She decided the apologetic approach might be best. "I didn't mean to…" To what? Had she actually done anything wrong? "The door upstairs wasn't locked."

He smirked and nodded. "In that case, how were you to know you shouldn't be down here?"

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Exactly."

"I'm Laurent, Bo's best friend. When your guard came to tell your brothers that you'd run off, Bo sent me to look for you." He crossed his arms over his broad chest. Despite his power stance, his scowl looked forced, and kindness filled his hazel eyes.

A thought struck, and the panic returned. "He can't think I was running away," she said, moving toward the stairs. "The treaty—"

"Is not in any danger. Prince Raphael confirmed your habit of wandering around unchaperoned. Bo just wanted to make sure you didn't

get too lost or *find somewhere* you shouldn't be." He gave a pointed look over her shoulder.

When he held a hand out in the direction of the stairs, indicating for her to leave, she relented and headed up with him following. She waited until they reached the art gallery to ask, "What is that room?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that," Laurent said, locking the outer door. He then led her to the walkway that crossed the stream. "If the king wishes to share it with you, he will."

She sighed, hearing his silent command to drop the subject. She would be patient, then. Bodin had opened up the night before, sharing parts of his life. Nothing deep, but Juniper thought maybe in time, she could get it out of him. She trailed her fingers along the iron railing as they made their way to the dining hall. Glancing over to Laurent, she asked with a mischievous smile, "So… *Bo*?"

SIX

Bodin

Theran ruled over Gilarn, shedding his light upon all those who lived there. Yet, within, he grew twisted and cruel. It was Eryx, with his shadows and darkness, who was gentler with his kingdom of Mesairla. And it was Eryx who gave Ronna her own portion of his lands to have as her own. Out of joy, she made Forosse a peaceful place that welcomed all.

Little did they know that small act would be their undoing.

"Where is my wife?" Bodin glared at her head guard, Richard, who had returned without Juniper. Again.

He had come in earlier without her. Apparently, she ran off when he and Samuel, the Mesairlan guard Bodin had handpicked for her, were escorting her to breakfast. He'd immediately sent them and Laurent back out to search for her, but he'd requested that they kept it quiet for now. The last thing he needed was for someone to hear that the new queen was wandering around alone, especially in the middle of a war. Anything could happen to her. His stomach churned merely at the thought.

Raphael tried reassuring him that she was fine, that this wasn't uncommon behavior for her. She liked to sneak around and explore. At least they weren't worried… Unlike Bodin.

Now, the two Forossan princes ceased talking on the right side of the table, where they had been picking at their breakfast plates. Raphael asked Richard, "Did you check by the rivers and streams?"

Bodin almost laughed. There were dozens throughout Kehlir, weaving between buildings and around the palace. It would be impossible to search all of them that quickly.

The older man seemed to hesitate, as if picking up on his unspoken thoughts. “As much as possible, Your Highness. We’ve been searching the areas that overlook the water, but the palace is so large. I thought it might be best to return and see if she’d found her way here yet.”

With a sigh, Raphael ran his fingers through his light hair that was just a few shades darker than his sister’s. “Juniper…”

“I don’t understand,” Bodin said. “You and your father told me she’d been kept in a tower the past fifteen years. Now, you expect me to believe that this entire time, she’s been sneaking out, wandering the streets?” He glanced at each man. “How do we know she didn’t run away?”

“She’s very curious and doesn’t like feeling trapped,” the eldest prince said, still appearing not the slightest bit concerned.

Hugo remained quiet, his eyes on his eggs and toast. Once again, Bodin wondered what that was about. Last night, there had been tension between him and Juniper, and when she was telling Bodin about her brothers later, she hadn’t said much regarding him. She’d mentioned that they’d been close as children, but about a decade ago, he’d stopped spending time with her and had grown distant and rude.

“But despite having ample opportunity to flee from her imprisoned life,” Raphael continued, “she always returned. I would wager to say she simply wanted a moment to herself and to see her new home, and I’m sure she will be back soon. Unless… last night, you gave her a reason not to…”

“I didn’t hurt her if that’s what you’re implying.” *I barely touched her*.

Raphael opened his mouth, but it was Richard who said, “She seemed in good spirits, Your Highness. It did not appear as if anything were wrong.”

Bodin nodded toward him in appreciation.

Hearing that this was a common occurrence didn’t ease his nerves though. Like Richard said, the palace was massive. Even he hadn’t explored every one of its nooks and crannies, and he’d lived here his entire thirty-three years.

Besides, there were secret places she could stumble upon that he hadn’t planned to share with her. Not yet, at least.

He wanted to go look for her himself, but Raphael insisted she would be fine and that she could take care of herself. Tapping his fingers on the long

table, Bodin waited. And waited.

He was about to ignore their advice and take off when the door opened and Juniper finally walked in with Laurent nearly half an hour later. Bodin pushed to his feet, releasing a breath.

She looked incredible in her mauve Mesairlan dress. Honestly, he was surprised she'd agreed to wear it. With its lower neckline that showed the tops of her pushed-up breasts and the slits on either side of the skirt that went from her ankle to mid-thigh, it was vastly different from the reserved dresses of her people. The tight-fitted bodice and thin, flowing material swaying around her legs let him easily imagine what was underneath—especially after seeing her in that tiny negligée last night.

But Juniper's head was bowed as she walked toward him, not showing any of the fire he'd seen glimpses of before. She stopped near the table without speaking or taking a seat, some of her light hair falling around her face. The customs of Forosse were strict, keeping women from talking freely, from sitting without being invited. They punished those who disobeyed or didn't act in what they deemed an appropriate manner.

Anger pulsed through him. Pushing his chair back out of the way, he approached his quiet wife and tilted her chin up with one hand, making sure to give her a smile. "Good morning."

"Good morning," she whispered.

Unable to resist, he brushed a strand hair that had fallen out of her braids behind an ear and leaned down to kiss her soft cheek. "I hope you slept well. You were still asleep when I left this morning"

She met his gaze with a look of confusion. Had she truly expected him to get that mad at her? What in the burning hells had she gone through growing up? He knew she wasn't this docile, quiet woman. The night before, he'd seen her defiance, her bravery, and the spark of life behind those beautiful jade irises.

He refused to be the one to extinguish that fire further. His queen needed to have the freedom to shine bright beside him. Trying to convey that he wasn't upset with her, he said, "I was worried you got lost."

"I'm sorry. I…"

When she trailed off, he shook his head. "No need to apologize. This is your home. I meant it when I said you're free to explore it as much as you'd like, but I thought we agreed you would keep a guard with you?" He narrowed his eyes but added a playful smirk so she would know it was in

jest. “I was just concerned you wouldn’t be able to find your way here to eat with us.”

He released her to pull out the chair closest to his in offering. She inclined her head and took a seat. Laurent sat on her other side as Bodin returned to his place at the head of the table.

“Did you enjoy your stroll?” Bodin asked, handing Juniper a basket of warm bread.

She hesitated only a moment, glancing at her brothers, before she lifted her chin once more. As she took a piece of bread for her plate, she said, “I did. The palace is incredible.” Mischief entered her gaze, and he welcomed the change in attitude. He never wanted her to feel like she had to hide who she was in front of him or in their home. “I was particularly amazed by the walkway over the river, with its glass floor to see the waters beneath, and the art gallery at the end.”

Bodin stilled with a forkful of sausage halfway to his lips. He set it down and cleared his throat. “You found the art gallery?”

“Mmhmm.” She took a bite of her bread.

He glanced at Laurent, who gave a subtle nod, causing Bodin’s stomach to drop.

“There are some very interesting things to look at there,” Juniper added with what he knew was an overly sweet smile. She’d found the room. He didn’t know how. It should have been locked…

Thankfully, Raphael cut in. “As happy as I am to see you enjoying your new home, Juni, we need to discuss the logistics of this alliance.”

“Perhaps you’d like to take your breakfast elsewhere, maybe to one of the rooms with a beautiful view, while we talk?” Hugo finally spoke up.

The color leached from her face. Despite sneaking out, she’d been presumably left out of discussions and decisions all her life. Bodin wouldn’t do that to her. Reaching over, he put a hand on her forearm, bare from her split sleeves. “She’s welcome to stay if she so chooses.”

She met his eyes, not hiding her surprise well.

“I just meant for her own sake,” Hugo said. “The girl will probably be bored—”

“The *girl* is my queen, and you will treat her as such,” Bodin snapped at the prince. “We do not pretend our women cannot handle the truth of war here; we do not hide them from reality or act as if they are fragile, like your

people do." He laced their fingers together, but it was Juniper who squeezed his hand in reassurance.

Raphael stared at them, the corner of his mouth twitching. If Bodin wasn't mistaken, that was pride and approval in his golden-brown eyes. With a nod, the crown prince said, "Good. Now, as I was saying, we are prepared to send half a battalion to the front lines in the next month."

"*Half* a battalion in a *month*?" Laurent said, his voice full of incredulity. "Gilarn has at least three thousand troops. We cannot hope to survive against them with so little help, let alone defeat them and take back our lands."

Hugo and Raphael shared a look.

"The treaty was for at least two battalions," Bodin said.

"How many are in a battalion?" Juniper whispered, leaning toward him.

"Around a thousand."

Her eyes widened and shot to her brothers. "Five hundred against *three thousand*? They'll be slaughtered."

"Five hundred, for now. We will send more in waves." Hugo clenched his jaw, as if annoyed he had to explain.

Bodin took a deep breath; he was struggling not to tell the prince to leave. If Juniper wanted to learn more, she had every right. He hated the brief glimpse of embarrassment written on her face as she pulled her hand away and returned her attention to her food.

He might not want this marriage—he'd fought it until the last possible second—but it wasn't because he was opposed to the young woman specifically. After losing two wives, however, he'd vowed never to love again. He'd closed off his heart to that possibility, and he had known it wouldn't be fair to anyone if he remarried. Not to mention he'd lost his parents and brother, his entire family. He wouldn't let someone in just to be inevitably devastated another time; he couldn't take it. It was best to keep people at a distance.

Which meant that Bodin would never be able to offer her what she deserved.

But seeing her like this with her brothers? Maybe just being here, being free and respected, would be enough for her. He was glad she was here if only for that reason. Nadine wouldn't let her be alone, nor would Laurent, and Bodin would ensure she had everything she could ever want.

“That is unacceptable,” he said, glaring at the younger prince. “The treaty said two battalions upon our marriage. We upheld our end of the bargain—the wedding as well as the trunks of jewels and coins prepared to return with you to your king.”

“The treaty didn’t say you would get them all at once—”

“Then, you won’t be getting all of the coins at once.” He raised his voice.

Hugo shoved to his feet, and Juniper flinched at the sudden outburst. Laurent stood in an instant, his hand on the pommel of his sword, but Bodin simply stared at the man. To his surprise, it was Raphael who said, “Sit down, Hugo.”

“This is ridiculous,” he hissed. “For all we know, they didn’t even consummate the marriage, so why should we follow through? They wouldn’t allow a witness, and now he’s refusing to let the physician examine her for—”

“Enough.” The whispered word was barely more than a breath, but Bodin was doing everything he could to remain calm. With each accusation, she had grown paler, sinking down farther into her chair. Through a clenched jaw, he said, “If you say one more thing about Juniper, I will send you back in pieces with the fucking jewels in a trunk. Am I understood?”

Hugo appeared flustered. “She’s my sister.”

“And she’s *my* wife!” he exploded, jumping to his feet and slamming his hands onto the table. “She is the Queen of Mesairla, and you are done speaking about her like that. Am I understood?”

“Perhaps *you* should be the one to take your food elsewhere, Prince,” Laurent said with a snarl so unlike him.

Hugo glanced at Raphael, as if he couldn’t believe the suggestion, but his brother only nodded. With an exasperated scoff, Hugo kicked his chair back and stormed out of the room, yelling obscenely once in the hall beyond. That was when Bodin noticed Richard mirroring Laurent’s stance, one hand on his sword. He’d angled himself between the path to Juniper’s side of the table and the door, watching the volatile prince leave.

Silence descended around the room. Bodin turned his attention to Juniper. Stepping around the corner of the table, he crouched next to her. “Hey. Are you all right?”

“You didn’t need to do that,” she whispered.

He found himself tilting her chin up again, almost as if he couldn't stop himself, forcing her to look at him and silently vowing to do that as many times as needed until she held her head high on her own. He brushed his thumb across her cheek. "Yes, I did." Standing, he pressed a kiss to the top of her head before he could think better of it. Something compelled him to protect this woman, to comfort her and make her happy. It was bizarre given they'd met yesterday, but it was like he couldn't resist. "I'm sorry."

He wasn't entirely sure if he was apologizing for the fact that she had to deal with her ass of a brother or for kissing her again. When she gave him a small smile, he let out a relieved breath.

"Bo, maybe we should…" Laurent trailed off.

Bodin glanced from his friend to the remaining prince, who seemed shocked but not angry at him for dismissing his brother. "Laurent, will you escort Juniper back to the art gallery?"

His brow furrowed. "What?"

Juniper's own jaw dropped slightly, but she shut it again without argument.

"She seemed excited about what she found earlier," Bodin said, wanting both his friend and queen to understand that he wasn't trying to get rid of her. Then, an idea struck. "Maybe you could show her around one of the more… exclusive selections. Something that will cheer her back up."

Laurent's eyes widened, but he quickly masked his surprise. "Yes… I can do that."

Bodin faced his wife as she slowly stood wearing a defeated look. He gently grabbed her arm before she could walk away. "Unless you want to stay." Lowering his voice, he said, "I'm not making you leave. I just thought after that, you might enjoy returning to the gallery."

She stared at him for a moment, her demeanor shifting from crestfallen to excited. "You'll let me see what's behind the doors?"

He chuckled, loving that she put it together so easily. Her family truly didn't give her enough credit. Pulling the keyring off of his belt, he held it up between them. The way her face lit up made his heart beat faster.

"Stay with Laurent," he said with a pointed look. "You may take your most trusted guard if you wish, but no others, please."

She nodded and reached for the keys, but he didn't release them yet.

Leaning in, he whispered, "I'm trusting you with this, Juniper. I don't let just anyone see what's in those rooms."

Her gaze met his, and the enthusiasm there morphed into a softer, understanding smile. “Laurent and one guard only. I promise.”

Bodin swallowed past the lump forming in his throat, fear making him hesitate. He’d known this woman for less than a day, yet he believed her. More than that, he realized he wanted to share this secret with her—the girl who’d been locked away, hidden from the world most of her life.

Her curiosity and enthusiasm reminded him a little of Elias. His brother was always sneaking around and getting into trouble. The two would have gotten along well.

And that realization was why he made a silent vow to make her happy.

She had no choice in this marriage, but he could give her a form of freedom.

He could share his secrets and let her explore more than just the halls of this palace.

SEVEN

Juniper

Despite their tenuous peace, the gods had a secret. Each brother sprinkled a drop of their magic into the lake at the center of the continent in hopes of passing on their powers to the humans and taking full control. Ronna knew how important balance was, however, so she enchanted the lake to only allow those from the gods' respective kingdoms to gain their specific magic.

Therefore, those born in Mesairla could wield shadows, and Gilarnians possessed light.

Apart from the disapproval in his eyes, facing Richard in the hallway was a comfort Juniper hadn't expected to have here when she first found out about the marriage alliance. She assumed he would be assigned a new position back home, as he planned to return with her brothers. Juniper dreaded the goodbye in their future, but she was happy her friend was here for the time being. She gave him a sheepish smile. "Sorry."

"Mmhmm." Unlike any of her other guards, he wasn't afraid to speak to her casually. The rest of those who'd traveled with them had kept their distance on their journey while still giving her wary glances—not that she didn't understand, given the mystery surrounding her. She didn't know which of them would take over as her head guard. Rafe had told her a handful would stay, but she didn't know who. Undoubtedly, the man Bodin had asked to accompany her this morning, Samuel, would be assigned to her more permanently. Her husband clearly trusted him, and Samuel

seemed pleasant enough. No one could really replace Richard though. He acted more like a parent than either her mother or father did, and she knew he would protect her with his life. Whereas she wasn't so sure about the others.

Juniper was eternally grateful he'd been sent with her at all. Having him here for her wedding, for this life-altering event, had meant the world to her. She truly wished he wasn't leaving, but she knew he had family to return to—a sister and her young children that she knew he helped care for after her husband passed away.

"Will you come with us please?" she asked. Samuel approached, and Laurent cut him off to speak with him quietly.

Richard bowed his head. "Of course, Your Majesty."

"That's so strange to hear," she confessed. She wouldn't have said as much to anyone else—she refused to appear unprepared or weak when she could help it—but she trusted him.

"It suits you." He gave her a soft smile. "Though, I admit, I almost slipped up and called you 'Princess'. Habits, and all, but one I'm more than happy to change."

She would miss him referring to her that way if she were honest. It had always felt more like a term of endearment from him rather than a title.

Samuel started toward the dining room, but she whispered, "Sorry," as he passed. He paused and visibly inhaled with a sharp nod before continuing.

She felt guilty for all of two seconds. Until she heard him chuckling.

"Shall we?" Laurent said, joining them and offering his arm.

Juniper nodded, her earlier excitement returning, but there was also a sense of apprehension creeping in. As she hooked a hand around his elbow, she thought about Bodin's words: *I'm trusting you with this, Juniper.* He barely knew her, and yet, he was allowing her to see something that was clearly a secret. She squeezed the keys in her free hand, letting the cool iron press into her palm. It calmed her nerves, knowing that whether she could explain it or not, he did trust her… at least with this.

Together, the three of them walked toward the gallery, slowing on the glass walkway that crossed the river so she could take in the view once again.

"It's so beautiful," she said in awe. "How do you get anything done around here when you could sit and stare at this view forever? Actually,

what do you do anyway? You're not a guard, and you seem too young to be an advisor." He appeared close to Bodin's age, maybe a bit younger. She would guess he was in his late twenties.

Laurent's deep laugh made her glance toward him. She couldn't help but compare his clean-cut looks with those of her new husband. He appeared more like royalty with his short, light-brown hair, trimmed beard, and fitted apparel than Bodin did with his rugged appearance.

She couldn't stop replaying his reaction to Hugo in her mind. The way he'd stood up for her, claimed her as an equal. She'd never known a man to behave as such. Even for show. Though, she didn't think it was an act with Bodin. If it was, he was *very* convincing. It sent butterflies careening through her stomach when he placed a kiss on the top of her head and tucked her hair back. He was so fierce, losing his temper so quickly with her brother, but with her, he was… gentle. Sweet. The contradiction gave her a headache.

However, that also might have been the aftereffects of the bourbon and wine from the night before.

Laurent stopped walking, and she realized he'd asked her a question.

"Sorry, what?"

"I know this," he indicated his entire body with a hand, "is distracting, but unfortunately, Bo doesn't share. So, we'll have to fight our mutual desire, my Queen."

Her cheeks heated. She released his arm and stepped back, sputtering, trying to come up with a response. Surely, he didn't think she would betray her husband like that. She tightened her fist around the set of keys and swallowed. Richard moved closer, as if sensing her distress.

Then, she noticed a twinkle in Laurent's gaze. He was teasing her. Remembering what Nadine had told her about him, she rolled her eyes and continued down the walkway, leaving a seemingly amused Laurent behind. "Is every man in this kingdom so arrogant?"

"No," he said, catching up to her. "But there's no need to pretend, Juni. Don't deny our love."

She giggled at his ridiculous behavior. Halting, she snapped her eyes to him.

His grin softened. "Feel better? You seemed… uneasy."

The back of her throat burned. Had he done all that for her, to get her out of her head? Nodding, she whispered, "Thank you."

“That’s what friends are for.” He shrugged, as if it was as simple as that.

Little did he know, she’d had very few friends in her life. Besides her maids back home and a couple of people in Nortussa she talked to while sneaking around, she didn’t really have anyone other than Rafe and Richard. And the two villagers didn’t even know her true identity. “We’re friends? We just met last night.”

“Yes, and you married my best friend.” He looped his arm through hers and led her deeper into the gallery. “Which means we’re now friends too.”

She glanced back to make sure Richard was still following. He met her gaze with a sad smile and a nod, silently telling her he understood how big this moment was for her. He knew better than anyone how lonely her life had been, how much she longed for friends.

“To answer your question, I do serve as an advisor of sorts, but I have also trained among soldiers. I’m the king’s right-hand man.”

“So, you just follow him around doing whatever he asks?” She raised a brow. “Like escorting his new wife around to distract her?”

With a smirk, he said, “Pretty much. Which brings me back to what I asked before when you were stunned and distracted by my beauty. Are rivers and mountains your favorite type of location?” He opened the door to the spiral staircase with his own key. “Do you prefer warm or cool weather?”

“I don’t know. Something in the middle for the temperature, I guess?” She hadn’t exactly been to many places in order to have a favorite.

They traveled lower and lower before coming to the large round room. It nearly took her breath away, even though she’d expected it this time.

“What is this?” Richard angled himself in front of her, pivoting to take in the twelve massive doors.

Laurent pointed to the keys in her hand. “Those open these doors. Each is a unique experience that is… difficult to explain. That’s why I’m asking about your favorite places and seasons. They… coordinate with certain ones, to put it simply.”

Juniper had no idea what he meant. “I haven’t been many places, so I don’t really know what my favorite is.” A memory came to her suddenly. “When I was little, we traveled near a meadow that seemed really peaceful. I don’t remember much about it, but I know it was beautiful and I didn’t want to leave.”

“A meadow?” He grinned. “You want that first door on your right, then.”

She turned toward the rounded door next to the stairs. The first one she’d tried opening earlier. When she hesitantly took a step closer, Richard stuck an arm out. He shook his head. “Don’t even think about it.”

“It’s just another part of the gallery,” she said before holding the keys up. She examined them in the flickering torchlight. The doors were carved with different intricate designs, and it seemed the iron keys each matched a specific door.

This one had flowers and vines covering it, so she singled out the key with a similar vine wrapped around its stem and bow.

“Juni,” Richard warned, foregoing all formalities.

“I can go first.” Laurent moved to her side, and she reluctantly handed him the keys.

She held her breath as he unlocked the door. He looked over his shoulder toward her with a grin and then pushed on it.

To her surprise, it swung open like a regular door, but the sight beyond was anything but ordinary. Even Richard let out a curse. Both walked closer, as if drawn toward the impossible sight in front of them.

Juniper shook her head. She looked at the stairs then back. “How? We’re underground…”

Laurent didn’t hesitate to go through the doorway, and she and Richard followed. Her guard went first, one hand on his sword. It was pointless to argue with him, so she waited to enter after him.

“How?” she repeated the moment her feet touched the grass.

Tall green grass went as far as the eye could see, glittering in the sun. She did a double take. It was late morning. The sun should be a lot higher in the sky, not lowering and creating a golden glow everywhere. As she wandered farther, Laurent closed the door, and she whipped around, only to find a forest behind them. Not a wall. The door was still there but simply standing on its own.

She ran to it, and he didn’t stop her from yanking it open again. The round cellar room greeted her. Her mind reeled as she rushed around to the other side of the door instead, near the tall trees where they stood reaching for the sky. She put one shaking hand against the solid back.

“How?” she whispered again as Laurent and Richard approached. It seemed that was the only she was capable of saying at this point. She put an

arm across her stomach, grateful she hadn't eaten much. This was the most mind-boggling thing she'd ever encountered. It made zero logical sense. And while a sliver of her feared it, feared what it meant, the rest of her was thrilled.

Laurent smiled in earnest and offered his hand. "Magic."

Slowly, she took it and let him lead her back out from behind the door. The three of them walked toward the meadow of wild grass and flowers. With the golden light of the setting sun shining, it was absolutely mesmerizing. It nearly took her breath away.

Tears rimmed her eyes as they came to a stop. In the distance, a light fog rolled through the trees and hills. Birds chirped from their homes in the forest.

It was Richard who said, "They're portals."

"Yeah." Laurent squeezed Juniper's fingers.

But where were they? It was a different time of day… She could feel him staring at her, but she still couldn't look away from everything, cease taking it all in. Reaching out, she brushed her free palm over the closest flowers. The soft petals were real. This wasn't a dream or trick.

"You have magic?" she whispered, her heart racing. While her kingdom had remained neutral in this war for Valétoi until now, her people did not accept those with such power. Hence why they hadn't fought for the Valley of Stars near Lac des Rêves—the lake where magic was said to originate.

According to legends, the gods blessed the lake that sits on the border of Mesairla and Gilarn. Those who drank from its enchanted waters were given magic that differed between the two kingdoms. Those from Gilarn had the ability to wield and manipulate light, which often gave them healing powers as well. Mesairlans were gifted with shadow magic and strength.

All were passed down through family lines but weakened over time. The need to return to the lake to gain more magic resulted in war for the surrounding land that lasted for centuries. There were brief ages of peace, when treaties had been signed, but people were too greedy for it to continue for long.

Before she was born, there had been such an age. For nearly a century, there hadn't been any major fighting. Then, Bodin's father had declared war after the death of the younger prince. She remembered it well because it was the same year her parents had decided to keep her in the tower,

claiming it was too risky for a little princess to be out in this dangerous world.

They had furnished her new rooms, decorating them as extravagantly as the rest of the castle, but eventually, she saw it for what it truly was: a prison. In the beginning though, it had seemed like a fun new adventure. Her mother and Hugo spent most of their time with her, and her other brothers visited fairly frequently. She even had a tutor to keep up with her lessons.

She had learned about the break in the treaty, but much of it was speculation. No one knew exactly what happened other than that the king blamed Gilarn for his second son's sudden death—Bodin's younger brother, Elias—and that he then outlawed Lumen magic. That led to her reading every book she could on magic and how it came to be. Both in books she was given by her tutor and those she found while sneaking around years later, after her family's visits grew infrequent and her boredom and loneliness led her to learn and find adventure wherever she could. That was just one reason she had loved creeping through the shadows of the castle and the village beyond—to find more stories and accounts.

It fascinated her, but it also grieved her to know so many died because of it.

Between those born with unnatural strength and those who could heal and keep fighting… Neither side had a true advantage.

Until Gilarn had a much higher number of soldiers. Mesairlans were dying at faster rate because of that lack of healing power. That was why Juniper was here. Because her kingdom wasn't part of the war, her father had an army not being used. And Bodin needed it. His people needed it.

But even with her knowledge on the different types of magic and the history of this war, it didn't make sense that this portal existed. That her husband had a room full of them. She'd never heard of such power beyond rare fairy tales from hundreds of years ago.

"No, I don't have magic," Laurent said, pulling her back to the present.

Her stomach sank a little. For a split second, she had let herself get excited about the possibility. She'd wanted to hear more, to see what he knew that she hadn't learned at home. Before she could question him further, however, he added the one statement she hadn't expected. The one fact that changed everything.

"Bo does."

EIGHT

Bodin

The people cherished their gift of magic, but too soon, they also began fighting for more power. Neither kingdom was content, and so, they tried to claim the land surrounding the lake—the Valley of Stars, it came to be called.

Hours passed before Bodin and Raphael finally settled on an agreement—with a few of their advisors joining the conversation mid-morning. In the end, they decided that Forosse would send one battalion to the front lines immediately, and another half would arrive a fortnight later. There would also be soldiers sent here to protect the capital. It wasn't going to win them this war, but it would help them survive a little longer while he tried to come up with another plan.

To his surprise, Prince Raphael was reasonable and respectful. He behaved nothing like his younger brother, who hadn't returned for the negotiations—not that Bodin was going to complain about that.

After their advisors were dismissed, Bodin and Raphael adjourned to his private study. He poured them each a glass of rum—brought by the prince from Forosse—before each sitting in one of the armchairs. Raphael took the opposite seat and said, "I wanted to thank you for earlier."

Bodin's brow furrowed. "For what?"

"Defending Juniper," he said with a small smile. "Standing up for her and treating her well."

“I meant every word.” Bodin sighed and set his glass on the side table. “She didn’t choose to be used in this agreement, and I’m going to make sure she doesn’t suffer for it.”

Raphael shook his head a fraction. “You know, the stories about you paint a much different picture, and I told her they weren’t true, but I’m glad I was right. She deserves a happy life. That’s why I…”

“Why *you* pushed for the marriage alliance?” They were approaching the conversation he wanted to avoid. It was necessary though. He’d wondered why they had included Juniper in their deal when he had only requested the soldiers. *They* had initiated talks of a wedding, not him. “After all these years… You know, my father expected you to renegotiate. But when Elias was killed, your family took her into hiding instead.”

Her brother stared down at his hands, at the amber liquor in his glass. “It was too dangerous. My parents thought you would be targeted next and didn’t want her caught up in the middle.”

“So, they locked her in a tower?” Bodin huffed out a breath and shook his head. He couldn’t bring himself to address the rest, to tell this man that he’d been the first target. His much younger brother had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“I’m sorry,” Raphael said, lifting his gaze. “I remember Elias well. He was a great boy.” Apparently, Bodin wasn’t getting an answer about the tower. The prince seemed sincere, but he was very clearly redirecting the conversation.

Bodin’s throat tightened. He took another sip of his rum to give him a moment. “She doesn’t know, does she?”

The prince sighed. “What good would that do anyone? She was six and didn’t know him as anything but a friend she met while visiting.”

“She deserves the truth.”

Her brother tilted his head. “If you want to tell her, be my guest. I just don’t see what difference it makes.”

“She was supposed to marry *him*,” Bodin hissed. “Not me.”

Raphael was quiet for a long minute. The grandfather clock ticked in the corner of the room, and the faint crackling of the low fire filled the air. Otherwise, it was silent until he simply whispered, “I know.”

Setting his glass down, Bodin groaned. This was a nightmare. Raphael had a point; in the end, it wouldn’t make a difference. Juniper didn’t know that her last visit here as a child had been so that their parents could sign the

marriage agreement. She had no idea that Bodin wasn't the first man she was promised to without her consent. But he still hated the thought of lying to her.

"She's a good girl," Raphael continued. "Smart and incredibly kind, despite being shoved into the shadows her entire life. The world tried to forget about her, but she still cares about others with her whole heart. When we got your missive, I thought it could be her chance to get away and start fresh. She never fought it or questioned it, so I'm sure she felt the same."

Bodin nodded in understanding, even as his heart broke for her. "She'll be free here."

"Thank you," Raphael whispered. "And thank you for not…" He cleared his throat. "She seemed happy this morning, not terrified or… in pain. *Fuck*. I hate this." He ran a hand through his brown hair with a chuckle then downed the rest of his rum. "I do not want to talk about last night… or hear any details. I just wanted to say I appreciate that you didn't hurt her."

It was impossible not to smile at the squirming prince. He could ease his mind and tell him nothing happened, but he wouldn't risk their arrangement. Instead, he said, "I will never intentionally hurt her. In fact, I'll do everything in my power to keep her safe. You have my word. I'd like her to be happy here, and I'll do what I can to make that happen."

Raphael mumbled his thanks again, but he seemed to want to say more. Setting his glass on the table, he sighed. "Why? You don't know her."

"I don't need to know someone to wish them well." Crossing his arms, he added, "Besides, I know what it's like to live in the shadows, to want more in this life. I've experienced trauma and misery. More than that, I know what it's like to have a younger sibling to protect." Even if he had failed Elias. "I get why your family left so suddenly after Elias was killed. It was a dangerous time to be in a kingdom going to war. But I don't understand why she was kept in a fucking tower for the past decade and a half. However, regardless of the reason, I have the means to make sure she never has to experience that again."

"You're a good man, Your Majesty."

He waved a hand. "Please, we're brothers now. Just Bodin."

Raphael nodded. "Rafe."

"Can I ask you a question, Rafe?" When the prince nodded again, Bodin said, "Why didn't you stop her? You and her guard knew she was sneaking

out of the castle in the past; why didn't you make her stop?"

"Could you?" he asked in a soft, almost broken tone. "If you had a little sister that you cherished more than just about anything and she'd been locked in a tower, would you stop her from escaping when she hadn't done anything wrong?"

Bodin's jaw clenched, the back of his eyes burning. He never would have stopped Elias. He thought about Nadine too and how he would have reacted if something like that had happened to her. His chest tightened.

"She was a fucking child when they put her in there, Bodin. She was six years old," Rafe said.

"Then, why didn't you get her out?" His anger started building within. Juniper had seven older brothers, and not one of them convinced her parents to let her free?

"My father is a cruel and vindictive man. You don't disobey his orders or question him. People who do are punished or hanged. Ask Hugo."

Bodin's forehead creased in confusion. He couldn't imagine a parent harming their own children. His own father had gone to war over one of his. A pang of grief made Bodin's chest ache, and he took another sip of his alcohol. It had been years since he lost his parents, but the pain remained strong.

"I didn't stop her from leaving, and in truth, I hoped she would run away," Rafe went on. "But she always came back. Out of fear of our father. So, I would follow her from the shadows when I could. Richard was always with her, whether she knew it or not. And we watched as she brought her jewels to struggling families for them to sell. She saved portions of her meals to bring to those who were starving. She brought children her own clothes and toys. She made friends beyond the high walls of the castle who didn't know she was the princess."

With every revelation, every new thing he learned about Juniper, Bodin's resolve strengthened. She was pure light in this dark world, and he would do everything in his power to protect her, to keep her shining bright.

"She's the most selfless person I know," her brother added, and Bodin agreed without pause. Rafe's smile went from sweet sorrow to amusement. "But she can also be… feisty. Don't let that sweet façade of hers fool you."

Bodin laughed. "Oh, I've seen beneath it. She also has a filthy mouth."

Rafe rolled his eyes. "A habit she picked up from the sailors near the docks she frequented. She's always loved the water, so that was where she

spent a lot of time. Much to our chagrin, that was also where she slowly made a close friend. He didn't know who she was, of course, but he looked out for her."

A strange sensation stirred in his heart. Almost like jealousy.

It couldn't have been that though. He'd never really been a jealous person, not even with his first two wives. And he refused to have such feelings for this woman. No matter how perfect she seemed, she wasn't his. He would not let another person in only for them to be ripped away like the others.

The grandfather clock chimed, and they both looked at the time.

With a sigh, Rafe pushed to his feet. "Well, Bodin, I should head out so I can tell my father about our arrangement. I'd like to make it to Marsonia before nightfall so we can stay at the inn there." He grinned. "Care to tell me where you sent my sister to distract her?"

Convincing Rafe to go prepare for his journey while Bodin went to find Juniper was harder than negotiating for soldiers had been, but he managed it. He reached the room of portals and closed his eyes. Having made each one, he could sense when they were used. He could feel when others were on the other side of the portals, along with hints of their emotions while in them. Though, the only people who knew about them were Laurent and Nadine… until now. They visited from time to time, but not as often as they used to, and he couldn't help but wonder if that would change with the arrival of his wife.

With a smile, he basked in Juniper's joy. While he loved getting to feel his friends' appreciation for the magical lands, there was something so refreshing about his wife's emotions flooding into his mind and soul. This was new to her, and her wonder was intoxicating.

Bodin needed more, needed to see her smile as she realized just how free she could be here. Opening his eyes, he went to the first door to the right of the stairs. He turned the knob, but it was locked. *Good*. That meant Laurent was following the rules they'd agreed upon years ago. Bodin put his palm against the door and took a deep breath. He focused on the lock, on how it worked, and poured his magic into it, waiting for the click to

sound. It took a lot of energy to use his magic this way, but if he used caution, making sure not to force it, it didn't drain him too badly. As soon as the lock clicked, he pushed inside.

Or rather, outside.

He closed the door behind him and headed toward the trio sitting in a clearing near the meadow, where the grass was shorter and easier to traverse. Juniper's eyes snapped to his, and his steps faltered. Her kingdom didn't accept magic, but he'd hoped she would be different. The last thing he wanted was for her to fear him or these places.

Before he could speak, she scrambled to her feet, which tangled into her skirt in her hurry to get up. He reached out to steady her and thanked the goddess when Juniper didn't pull away. Instead, she waved a hand around excitedly to indicate the wildflowers and forest. "It's beautiful."

Laurent and Richard stood as well, but Bodin's attention was wholly on his radiant wife. He nodded and moved closer. "I love it here. It's peaceful."

"You… have magic," she whispered. "But how did you create portals?"

He didn't see any reason to lie. Not after he'd already let her in this far. "I don't know exactly how I have the ability to do it. The books on Noxian magic don't usually mention it. I've only been able to find a vague explanation of it possibly existing hundreds of years ago."

She nodded and looked around. "So, where are we?"

"This was a meadow I played in as a child. It's near our summer home."

"We have a summer home?"

"We do," he said with a smile at her use of *we*. He held out a hand and waited to see if she would take it. "Your brothers are leaving soon. I thought you'd like to see them off. Or at least Rafe."

At that, she let out a small laugh that was one of the sweetest sounds he'd ever heard. She moved closer and entwined their fingers. "Can I see more of these places after?"

"Of course." He led her to the door, with the other two men following.

Once they made it back into the palace and began the trek up to the ground floor, Juniper asked, "Did you two come to an agreement? Will he send a full battalion?'

"One now, and another half in a couple of weeks." He pushed open the door at the top of the stairs. Glancing back, he gave Laurent a nod, and his friend paused to lock it behind them.

"Will that be enough?"

Contrary to her brother's reaction, Bodin liked that she was asking these questions. It showed how much she cared, which he could have seen even without Rafe's stories earlier. Bodin had entered this marriage intending to keep her out, just as he had with almost everyone else for the past decade, but he couldn't with her. It seemed physically impossible. Juniper made him want to trust her immediately, and that wasn't something he did lightly. He was drawn to her like a moth to a flame. Maybe that would end horribly, but he was tired.

Tired of hiding. Of fighting.

Of being alone.

Though, he couldn't let her in completely. His heart had blackened long ago—he'd had his one great love in this life and lost it—and there was nothing left to give in that sense. But he could make sure she didn't become bitter like that too, and he could see them becoming friends at least. Perhaps then, she would stay safe from whatever in this universe had decided to keep taking away people he loved.

"It will help until I can figure out a better solution," he told her.

They made it to the main entrance and out the doors to where a couple of carriages awaited the princes and their envoy. Hugo stood leaning against one with his arms crossed, and at the sight, Bodin made a mental note to ask Juniper why the man was so disagreeable. Was it because of what Rafe had hinted at earlier? Had he learned the hard way not to question their father? Was that why he behaved like he did?

Juniper tensed, but she wasn't looking at her brother. Releasing Bodin, she turned toward her guard.

"I… I don't want to say goodbye," she said in a quiet tone.

The older man appeared confused for a moment, but then his eyes widened and he shook his head. "I'm not leaving, Your Majesty."

"Wh-what?" It was barely more than a whisper. Prince Rafe came out then, bounding down the gray stone steps toward them. Juniper whipped her head in his direction. "Is it true? Is Richard staying?"

Rafe smiled in earnest, as if understanding how important this was to her. The prince nodded. "He's been assigned to stay here as your head guard."

If Bodin hadn't been watching her so closely, he wouldn't have seen the flicker of sadness in her green eyes or the way her grin slipped for a fraction

of a second. But she seemed skilled in the art of hiding her emotions—a trait they shared, apparently.

Juniper moved to hug her brother, and he didn't hesitate to return the embrace, much to Bodin's surprise. The people of Forosse weren't known for being warm and loving. But Rafe seemed to truly care about his sister, and Bodin was glad she had at least one family member to count on.

"I'll miss you," she said.

He kissed the top of her head. "I'll miss you too, Juni. Write to me, and I'll try to visit as often as I can. All right? It's only a week-long trip—less if I'm on my own and traveling by horseback."

She agreed and released him. Pain filled her gaze as she faced Hugo. With a dramatic sigh, he pushed off the carriage and closed the distance between them. Bodin took a step forward, but Rafe put a hand on his shoulder to stop him from interfering.

Hugo tugged her into his arms, and she visibly relaxed against him. "Be happy, Juniper," he whispered into her hair.

He said something else too quiet for the others to hear. She sniffled as he let go of her. He inclined his head once toward Bodin, glared at Laurent, then marched to his carriage and climbed in. Rafe said goodbye one more time before following into the same coach.

Juniper waved as they took off, and Bodin slid his hand around her free one, letting her know he was with her. She'd spent so much of her life alone. He would make sure she never felt that way again.

NINE

Juniper

1 WEEK LATER…

Distraught at the humans' behavior and the way her brothers encouraged it, Ronna grew distant. She made sure those in her kingdom didn't have magic because she knew how it corrupted even the kindest of souls. And by keeping her people away from it, she managed to create a serene land where anyone could find sanctuary.

But it wasn't enough for her to find peace herself.

"Good morning."

Juniper lifted her gaze to the mirror and found her husband approaching, already dressed in his regal attire with his obsidian crown atop his head. The deep red swirls woven into his lapels were the only color on him, yet they were so dark as to appear almost black themselves. Paired with the scars slashing across his face, he appeared every bit as intimidating as he had when she first met him. Only, now, she knew of the gentle soul beneath the darkness. She swallowed thickly, her pulse racing.

Nadine stepped aside enough for him to move closer as she continued braiding Juniper's hair.

"Hi." Noticing the large box in his hands, Juniper asked, "What's that?"

"A gift." He put it on the vanity in front of her while leaning down to press a kiss to her cheek. Her stomach fluttered, just as it had with every soft touch and kind gesture he'd given her in the past week.

Bodin's demeanor hadn't changed since her brothers' departure. If anything, he seemed to relax and open up a little more. He still slept in the

adjoining room and didn't force her to share a bed, but he was behaving more affectionately with each passing day. He'd also remained true to his word, letting her explore wherever she wanted. Though, she'd decided to slowly see the other portals, not rush through them, so she could fully enjoy them and take them in. Instead, she had visited the art gallery, the library, and more of the palace with Laurent always at her side. She'd even had Nadine join them in the little nook that overlooked the river for tea and an afternoon of reading and talking while her husband was busy with his duties.

Juniper and Bodin had fallen into a comfortable routine, but the fact that they spent much of their days apart didn't sit well with her. They ate breakfast and dinner together, and then they talked by the fire in their room late into the night. But it was Laurent, Richard, and Samuel who accompanied her everywhere. All of whom were diligent in their watch, not letting her escape. Not that she wanted to… it was just so strange not needing to sneak around. It simply required an adjustment on her part.

She wasn't a fool; she knew Richard had followed her when she first ran away, and that he continued shadowing her over the years whenever she left the tower, but he'd usually kept his distance. He'd only made his presence known a couple of times. Once when a girl she'd thought was a friend tried to steal her coin purse. And again, when Juniper grew close with a young sailor and they'd started kissing in an alley.

Having a friend with her, talking to her and telling her stories while showing her around, was a whole new experience. One Juniper quite enjoyed. Yet, she often found herself wishing it was Bodin beside her. She hadn't wanted this marriage—neither of them had—but she also hadn't expected to be wed to a kind king who truly cared for his people and who treated her well.

"Juniper?"

She snapped her eyes back up to him, realizing she had been caught in her own tangled web of thoughts, yet again. It seemed like he was always pulling her head out of the clouds. "Sorry."

Bodin shook his head, waving off her apology like he did each time—he truly didn't seem bothered when she disappeared into her mind. "Are you going to open it?"

"Of course." She tugged at the bright white bow then set the ribbon aside. Lifting the lid off the box, she let out a gasp. She turned on her stool

as she pulled out the beaded crimson fabric. Nadine scolded her for moving, but Juniper ignored her. Her hair was practically done anyway; she'd just been fixing a couple of the tiny braids among her waves and placing in chains of black beads that now made more sense. Standing, Juniper dropped the box altogether and held up the dress. The absolutely incredible dress that mirrored the coloring of Bodin's clothing with sheer black chiffon overlaying the crimson. She was still getting used to the styles here and feeling exposed, but this…

"I had it made for today," Bodin said. "I thought it would be good to present a united front."

Juniper couldn't take her eyes off of it. The neckline was high enough to actually circle her neck, but there weren't any sleeves. Instead, small chains of shiny black beads hung down, looping so that they'd lay over each shoulder once on. The tight bodice had matching beads sewn into intricate patterns that looked identical to the swirls on his jacket. Only a single slit ran along one side of the thin, loose skirt.

"You don't have to wear it if you don't like it."

She hadn't realized she'd once again been lost in her own thoughts, absorbing the details of the dress that he'd thought to have made. Just for her. Just so they could stand together as one cohesive pair. The last thing she wanted was for him to question himself on such a beautiful gift. Swallowing, she handed the gorgeous gown to Nadine then closed the distance between her and Bodin. She wrapped her arms around his middle, and he sighed as he returned the hug.

"It's perfect. Thank you." She had been so nervous for today, unsure of what to wear. Appearing in front of the court for the first time since the wedding, she wanted to look the part of their queen. When holding up every dress in her wardrobe before the mirror, none felt right. This though? This dress was absolutely the right one. It was perfect.

"I also have a tiara for you. I'll grab it while you change," he said, releasing her and going to the adjoining room.

She followed Nadine behind the screen with a grin. The maid had her own smile in place as she helped her out of her robe and into the gown. "He had me take one of your other dresses to the seamstress after the wedding so she could use it for measurement alterations. It should fit, but I might need to do a few minor temporary stitches to get you through the day."

Juniper held her hair out of the way as Nadine laced up the back. On the other side of the screen, she heard Bodin return. He spoke quietly with someone—Laurent, it sounded like. As soon as Nadine finished, Juniper left the privacy of the screen and went to the tall mirror near the wardrobe. Bodin sucked in a breath at the first sight of her, and she turned toward him in question.

"Is something wrong?" She looked down, nervously running a hand along the front of the dress.

"Nadine, darling, why don't we give them a minute," Laurent said before Bodin had a chance to respond. Nadine glanced between Juniper and Bodin with a chuckle, which Laurent echoed as he grabbed her hand. "Come on, beautiful."

At that, Nadine rolled her eyes, but her cheeks flushed. She followed him out of the room, shutting the door behind them. Leaving Juniper alone with her husband, who was still staring at her with that heated look she'd seen more and more since their wedding night. His hands curled into fists at his sides, as if fighting the urge to reach for her—like she was resisting him.

"What?" she asked in a breathy tone, needing him to voice whatever this was out loud. She had to know if he felt this same tug that kept pulling her to him.

Bodin moved closer at a painfully slow pace, making her heart race in her chest. One hand cupped the side of her face, his thumb brushing her cheek before slipping down to the corner of her mouth. "You are… breathtaking."

Ironic, considering she was the one who was struggling to breathe right now. She couldn't even respond.

He released her and held up the tiara in his other hand. It was smaller than the crown given to her during the coronation ceremony, but it was so much more beautiful. The same dark jewels that were on his sparkled back at her.

"May I?" he asked. When she nodded, he gently placed it on top of her curled and braided hair, of which he then tucked a loose strand behind one ear.

She took the opportunity to rest her palms on his sturdy chest. With a start, she realized just how badly she wanted him to hold her again. To kiss her.

"Ready?"

Juniper licked her lips and nodded. His eyes darted toward the movement and darkened. She bit her lower lip to keep from smiling. If she had to guess, she would say he wanted to kiss her too.

“Remember, keep your head up. Walk with the confidence I know you’ve tried to hide most of your life.” Taking a step back, he seemed to take a recovery inhale and offered her his arm. “There will be many in attendance, but do not focus on them until we reach the thrones.”

“I understand,” she said as she slid a hand into the crook of his elbow. He guided her to the door, where Richard and Samuel waited in the hall to escort them. The former gave her a small nod as he took in her appearance and the way she held on to Bodin. She knew he worried about her, but he’d grown more at ease in their new home with time. They both had.

It only took a couple of minutes to reach the throne room on the main floor. Similar to the rest of the palace, it had vaulted ceilings, but it didn’t have the towering arched windows she’d come to love. Instead, three bands of colorfully paned glass wrapped around the entire room, high on the walls. It almost looked like glowing rainbow stripes, but what it did to the rest of the area was what really wowed Juniper. Across the marble floor, the colors almost appeared to be moving, swaying with the wind and clouds outside. And at the end of the long room, a dais with two dark thrones awaited.

A crowd also waited for them.

They were formally announced as the doors opened, and the people parted, creating a path for them to reach their seats. Each and every person in that large room bowed or curtsied as they passed. Juniper kept her eyes forward, her chin up, just as Bodin advised. Even if the sight of so many people made her want to run back to their rooms.

It didn’t make sense. For most of her life, she’d yearned to be free and among her people as herself, but now that she had the chance, she had to fight the urge to retreat and hide. As if sensing her spiraling thoughts, Bodin put his free hand over hers where it still rested on his arm and gave it a gentle squeeze, providing more comfort than he probably realized.

On the dais, they both turned to face their audience. To her surprise, Bodin let go and angled his body with his arm held out toward her. “May I present Juniper, Queen of Mesairla, my wife.”

For hours, Juniper and Bodin greeted citizens of Kehlir and the rest of the kingdom, listening to their struggles and requests. Bodin led the discussions, but he always looked to her to see what she thought about his decisions. She was included. She was a queen, and he made sure everyone knew that she wasn't just an ornament. It left her flabbergasted the first time. During the few occasions when she had crept out of her tower to see her parents in a similar setting, her mother hadn't spoken, and her father hadn't asked her anything or addressed her at all, for that matter. It was nothing like Juniper's experience here.

But when it ended for the day, they weren't done. He brought her back upstairs, removed his crown, and said, "I recommend wearing something a little more comfortable now."

Nadine took Juniper's tiara, setting it on her vanity table, and led her behind the screen again to change out of the gown and heels. As she dressed, Juniper asked Bodin, "What are we doing next?"

"It's a surprise," he said.

Juniper heard his wardrobe open and shut as he presumably changed as well. She ignored the heat rising to her cheeks at the thought of his state of undress and instead looked at Nadine, but the woman just shrugged. Amusement in her blue eyes told Juniper she *did* know though. In a simpler powder blue dress and comfortable shoes, she emerged once more and found Bodin standing in a dark red tunic and black trousers. He'd tied back his hair as well, leaving his scars in full view. She still hadn't learned what had happened there, but he hadn't seemed to want to share either, and she didn't want to push him. She knew he'd tell her when he was ready, as he'd shown many times already.

He reached for her, and hand in hand, they made their way downstairs and out of the main entrance of the palace. It felt so natural to walk beside him like this with their fingers entwined. It was like second nature at this point; she didn't even think about it. At least, not at first. Inevitably, she always realized how well they fit together, which then made her heart pound so hard in her chest that she was surprised he couldn't hear it. She wondered if he felt her pulse quicken in her wrist.

Juniper tightened her grip on him when she realized they were heading into the village proper. Grinning up at him, she asked, “Where are we going?”

“Not everyone is able to make it to the weekly levée to voice their concerns, so I like to personally walk through the town and see how things are going myself.”

Juniper exhaled, slowly shaking her head in amazement. How had the stories been so wrong about this man? Leaning in closer, she rested her head against his upper arm while they strolled down the cobblestone street. She could practically feel the tension leaving his body at her touch, and she smiled to herself.

The sun shining high above warmed her. She was grateful for the lighter dress now, but even in the more casual clothing, people recognized them. It didn’t help that a handful of guards followed.

“Your Majesties,” a young woman said with a curtsy before continuing on her way. Unlike when Juniper’s father made a rare visit into Nortussa and a large crowd gathered to see him, these people greeted Bodin and Juniper kindly but didn’t stop what they were doing unless they wished to speak about a specific issue. Because he did this so often that they were comfortable with him, she realized.

At least, *most* of them were kind. A few had steered clear, eying the king warily. Each time, he stiffened beside her, despite acting like he didn’t notice. Juniper also saw how different he behaved out here. On the throne, he’d been poised and a little stiff, but she assumed it was only because of the situation. But out here, where it was more relaxed… he wasn’t. He was still kind and listened to everyone who approached, but he was quiet and closed off. There was no teasing smile like he usually had for her.

“Bodin,” Laurent said, catching up to them. He dipped his head toward Juniper. “My Queen, you looked ravishing earlier. It was difficult to leave you alone with him.”

When she giggled, Bodin huffed out a breath and said, “Stop flirting with my wife. You’re going to give someone the wrong idea.”

Juniper rolled her eyes. She’d grown used to Laurent’s antics, and she actually enjoyed the entertainment, especially knowing he didn’t truly mean it. Nevertheless, they’d silently agreed it was the best way to playfully torment her husband. “Yes, Laurent, save it for back home.”

“Did you need something?” Bodin practically growled, making them both laugh.

Until Laurent said, “I received a letter from Moreau with an update on the frontlines.”

As he told Bodin the latest news from the war, Juniper’s attention snagged on a bookshop nearby. She tapped her husband’s arm and pointed toward it to tell him where she was going without interrupting. He nodded, and she went inside with Richard in tow, the bell over the door clanging to announce their arrival.

“Your Majesty.” An older man with thin graying hair stared at her in shock before seeming to remember to bow. “How can I help you today?”

She didn’t have anything specific in mind. Tall shelves lined either side of the shop, and she aimed for one as she asked, “Is it all right if I just look?”

“Of course. I’m honored, Your Majesty.” He walked back to the counter at the center, where he was writing on a scroll of parchment.

Only one other person was in here with them—a woman quietly reading across the room. Juniper grabbed a book at random and opened the cover. “A history of agriculture,” she whispered.

“Your favorite,” Richard said just as softly.

A snort escaped her, and she slapped a hand up over her mouth. She returned the book to its place and tried another shelf. Richard pulled down a book from a higher level, opened it, then handed it over with a raised brow. She looked at the title. “*The Three Kingdoms and Their War for Magic*. This is perfect—”

“Your Majesty?” a woman said from just behind them.

Juniper whirled around with a start.

It was the older woman she’d spotted when they first entered. “You’re the new queen, right?”

Richard stepped closer, putting himself between them a fraction.

“I am,” Juniper said with a smile, trying to show them both it was fine.

A dark look passed over the woman’s face though, and suddenly she wasn’t so sure. “I was a friend of Queen Camille’s. You are young and from a foreign land, so you cannot know…”

“What?” she breathed when the woman trailed off.

“That he is a monster, a killer. They say that she died in childbirth, but that cannot be; she was perfectly healthy throughout her life.”

Juniper swallowed, her stomach twisting. She didn't know what to say. It didn't matter, it seemed. The stranger wasn't finished.

"And Queen Beatrice dying in the forest by a mysterious creature, along with all of their guards? How did the king survive? How was he the only one?" She tried to move closer, but Richard put a hand up to stop her. Her gray eyes stayed on Juniper. "You need to be careful. Get as far away from these lands as possible before he destroys you too. You're in danger—"

"That is enough," a deep, familiar voice cut in.

TEN

Bodin

Centuries passed with generation after generation killing each other. The battle of light versus dark seemed never-ending, and Ronna couldn't ignore it anymore. In secret, she took the form of a woman, and with the help of her people who cherished unity above all else, she began to scheme. But in her planning, she never took into account the one other thing humans seemed to fight over most… Love.

Sweet peals of laughter drifted into the dining room before Juniper and Laurent did.

As much as Bodin enjoyed seeing the two happy, the sight of them together had started irritating him lately. Especially when Juniper had been distant with him over the past few days. Ever since that woman told her that he was dangerous, his wife had become quiet around him, almost shy. They continued eating together, but she had avoided him the rest of the time when she could. Even their evening chats had become nights of silently sitting together.

He hated that as soon as she walked into a room and saw him, her smile faded.

He hated that he couldn't tell if she now watched him with fear or pity in those beautiful green eyes.

He hated all of it, even if he knew it was for the best.

This wasn't supposed to happen. But somehow, here he was, caring about the woman he'd met mere weeks ago.

Juniper and Laurent strode in, chatting with wide smiles on their faces and their arms linked. The two had become close; it was evident to anyone who saw them together. Bodin had no reason to suspect anything was going on—he knew his best friend would never cross that line—but the fact that Juniper seemed so open and joyous with Laurent instead of him…

He pushed to his feet as they neared to pull her chair out, nearly toppling his own in the process. He could have sworn Laurent rolled his eyes, but the man didn't comment as he rounded the table to the other side. Juniper paused for a moment before taking the seat. "Thank you."

"How was your day?" Bodin returned to his own place at the head of the table. The truth was, he'd started missing her throughout his days. And it was weighing on him.

"Well, thank you." She filled her plate with chicken and potatoes while a maid poured her wine. "Nadine walked with us down to one of the streams, and we had a picnic for lunch."

"And what were you two discussing when you came in? You seemed amused." He glanced from her to Laurent on his right.

The latter smirked, as if he understood exactly why Bodin was asking. As if he could see through the façade straight to the jealousy. "Oh, you know, just trying to convince her to run away from the monster with me. She's in denial, but I have no doubt she'll realize how deep our love is soon."

Bodin knew the man was teasing him. He knew Laurent was only trying to get a rise out of him. And yet, hearing his fear joked about out loud set off his temper. He glared at his friend, his chest heaving with each breath.

A soft hand landed on Bodin's arm, and he realized he was bending his fork from gripping it so tightly. He tossed it onto his plate.

"Stop," Juniper said, entwining their fingers instead of pulling away like he'd assumed she would. Like his strength and anger didn't frighten her in the slightest—a confusing concept considering the way she had kept her distance recently. "Ignore him, Bo."

Hearing his nickname on her tongue for the first time steadied his heart and mind.

"He's being extra obscene today. I was telling him that I wanted to ask you about which door to go through next." When he finally turned his attention to her, she beamed at him. "I was hoping maybe you could accompany me tomorrow."

Other than to get Juniper out that first day, Bodin hadn't been through one of the portals in years.

He knew Juniper had returned to the meadow portal a couple more times; he'd felt her in there. She had also visited one that opened into a snowy forest with a path that led to a small cozy cabin, as well as a door that had a beach on the sea along with a beautiful gazebo also set up for a light meal. He should suggest taking Nadine there next time; she loved sitting on the sand with her toes in the water. Did Juniper even know Nadine was aware of the doors? He hadn't told her, but he wasn't sure if Laurent had or not.

"I told her it might not be possible with so much going on," Laurent said in a more serious tone, giving him an out. He knew how big of a deal this was, how long it had been since Bodin had used the doors himself.

But he *wanted* to do this with her. "No, it's fine. Actually, would you like to go after dinner?"

Juniper's eyes widened, her lips curving upward. "Really?"

Taking a chance, he lifted her hand to kiss the back. "On one condition."

"What?" She raised a dubious brow, even as her cheeks turned pink. He loved seeing how she reacted to his touch, especially when it showed just how unafraid she was of him.

Squeezing her hand, he said, "I get to pick the door."

Bodin's heart raced in his chest as they descended to the familiar round room. He took in the doors, refusing to look at the last one on his left.

He'd asked Richard to stay behind, which was more difficult than negotiating this entire marriage deal and getting Rafe to let him retrieve Juni before he left—he was beginning to wonder if these men were capable of being anything but difficult where his wife was concerned. Eventually, the man caved, but only after arming Juniper with a dagger and informing them that if she didn't return within an hour, he would come in looking for her. To which Bodin had to remind Richard that *he* was the king, and she was, in fact, the queen, so if they wanted to spend the rest of the night alone in one of the magical lands, they would. The man had relented with a huff.

Bodin saw the fierce protectiveness he had over Juniper and couldn't fault him for that.

I promise nothing will happen to her. She's safe with me, he had vowed before leaving.

Her hand slipped into Bodin's, bringing him back to the present, and he tore his eyes away from the portals to look at his wife. She stared up at him in silent question, as if she could sense his reluctance. Fingers entwined, he led her to the seventh door from the right and stopped. "Have you been in this one yet?"

He knew the answer but wanted to see how she answered. She shook her head. "No, I keep going to the first because it's so peaceful. I've also gone through the third and fourth."

"I know." Bodin chuckled and held his free hand out.

"Laurent told you?" She put the iron keys in his palm, and he selected the correct one for the intricately carved door that looked like a starry night sky over trees with swirls twisting between the many trunks, branches, and leaves.

"Something like that." He unlocked the portal but waited to open it.

"Then, why'd you ask if you already knew?"

Bodin leaned closer to press a gentle kiss to her temple. Not answering, he instead told her, "There's plenty of time, but you should visit the rest to see if another sparks your interest more."

Juniper smiled and accepted his avoidance of her question. She seemed to do that a lot—sense when a topic was too sensitive for him to discuss just yet. And without fail, she always dropped it and moved on. "Will you visit them with me?"

He opened his mouth then shut it, unsure what to say. "It seems like you enjoy Laurent's company. Would you not prefer to go with him?"

"Laurent has become a good friend, and I do like coming here with him." She squeezed his hand and angled toward him, as if making sure he was really listening to her. "But he's not you, Bodin. He's not my husband; you are. And I'd like to spend more time with you if I'm being honest."

Letting a long breath out, he said in a soft tone, "After what that woman told you, I wasn't sure how you felt. You've been keeping your distance, so I thought…"

She shook her head with something akin to horror in her gaze. "Not because I *believed* her."

“Then, why?” He couldn’t keep the pain from leaking into his voice.

Juniper stared at him for a moment, as if debating on how to reply. Taking a deep breath, she started rambling.

“Because I hate that they think that of you. Because I want to yell at everyone who cowers away from you that they’re wrong, even though I’ve only known you for a few weeks.” She lifted a hand to his cheek, and it didn’t escape his notice that she touched the scars without a second thought. “Because you don’t let them see this wonderful man who I’m starting to…” Sighing, she stepped back and dropped her arms to her sides, seeming to need space to finish what she wanted to say. “I just hate that you close yourself off from them even while offering everything you can to help them. And it fucking terrifies me that I feel so strongly.”

“Juniper,” he whispered in disbelief. She really felt that way? Reaching for her, he hugged her close and kissed the top of her head. His pulse quickened as she held on to him just as tightly. “I’m scared too. I didn’t expect this.” *I didn’t expect you*.

“I’m sorry I was distant. It’s also been…”

He pushed her back enough to see her face. “What?”

“For years, I spent most of my time alone in a tower. Having so much freedom, seeing so many people every day, it’s been a little… overwhelming.”

Shit. Bodin hadn’t really considered that. “That’s why you keep returning to the meadow, why you stay in our bedroom so often.”

She nodded, and the walls around his heart crumbled a little more.

“If it’s too much—”

“No,” Juniper said quickly. “I love it, truly. I just need a break at times. I need to retreat to my solitude.”

Bodin swallowed, hesitating to ask his next question. “Would it be all right if I retreated with you on occasion? We don’t have to speak or anything, but could I sit with you in our room? Explore these portals with you when we need to escape it all?”

Her smile returned in full as she nodded. “I would like that very much.”

“Then, let’s start here.” He moved to open the door he’d unlocked. Juniper gasped and stepped forward through the portal, ever the eager woman wanting more in life, and it brought him an unexpected joy to be able to give that to her through these portals that he’d kept secret for so long. Bodin followed her into the dark forest.

“Bo…” she whispered.

He walked ahead of her so that he could turn back and watch her. The strings of small lanterns glowing in the trees overhead reflected in her wide green eyes. Her other hand lifted to cover her mouth.

“Welcome to my favorite place.” He led her down the twisting path, lined on either side by luminous flowers in an array of blues and purples. Fireflies fluttered around, and quiet music floated on the light wind. All of it combined to create the most magical, ethereal setting.

At the end of the path was a clearing big enough for tables and chairs. He always thought it would be perfect for a ceremony. Right now, a lone bench sat at the center. Even empty though, with just a single place to sit there, the space had a sense of serenity and happiness he rarely found elsewhere.

“This is your favorite spot?” Juniper asked as they lowered onto the bench.

“Yes. I used to come here to relax, to think, to remember…” He looked down at the grass.

She leaned into his side. “To remember?”

“My first wife, Camille.” He pulled away, immediately wanting to take back the words. “I’m sorry. You don’t want to hear—”

“Stop,” she said, cutting off his apology. “You don’t have to hide your pain from me or pretend you never loved another woman.”

Bodin swallowed past the lump in his throat, his mind catching onto one specific word in that sentence. *Another*. Refocusing, he said, “I made this portal in memory of her. We used to visit a similar place near her childhood home. It didn’t have the music or magical flowers, of course, but it was peaceful and felt enchanted all the same. I haven’t been here in a while…”

Juniper tilted his chin toward her, making him meet her understanding gaze. “Thank you for bringing me here.” After a moment of what seemed like hesitation, she asked, “What was she like?”

Her question caught him off guard. When he remarried the first time, Beatrice hated hearing Camille’s name, let alone details about their time together.

Maybe it was strange to bring her here, and were she anyone else, he might have doubted her motives, but Juniper seemed genuine in everything she did and said. He hadn’t really thought too much about it before choosing this door; he’d just wanted to share meaningful moment with her.

It felt so natural having her with him. A warm breeze drifted by, letting him take a deep breath and giving him the courage to continue. He laced their fingers together again. “I’d known Camille most of my life. She was the daughter of one of my father’s advisors, who was a nobleman. We weren’t really friends, but as you know, the life of a royal can be lonely at times.”

He immediately cursed himself. She didn’t have the same childhood as most royals. Her loneliness had been because she had truly been left alone. By her family. He still didn’t understand why. She said it was for her protection, but from what? None of her brothers had been kept apart from the rest of the world.

“Sorry…” he started.

“It’s all right. Keep going.”

It wasn’t all right, but that was a conversation for another time. Perhaps the next time Rafe came to visit, as he’d promised he would. So, Bodin kept going. “Whenever there was a gathering, we usually ended up together, avoiding our parents’ friends. As I got older, I sought her out more and more outside of events because I…”

“What?”

He sighed. “I really shouldn’t be talking about her with you.”

It wasn’t fair to this sweet young woman.

“It’s fine. I promise.” When he didn’t continue, she angled toward him and pulled one leg up under her as she said, “I know that most wouldn’t want to hear about another woman that their husband was in love with, but I’m under no illusions about this marriage, Bodin. I know you don’t love me, and probably never will. But I’d like to be friends. I want you to know that you can talk to me about anything.”

There was that word again. *Another*. He couldn’t bring himself to tell her she was wrong about what their marriage would mean, but he also couldn’t agree and say he would never fall for her. As much as he didn’t want to, she was making it very difficult, so he didn’t address the former statement, simply choosing to say, “I’d like that too.”

Juniper nodded. “Good. So, tell me more.”

He smiled, feeling lighter than he thought possible. “When my father suggested it was time to look for a wife, I knew I wanted it to be her. We’d grown close, so I asked her privately if she would be interested. I didn’t want to put her on the spot in front of everyone else. But it didn’t matter, she still said no.”

“Wait. What?” Juniper chuckled before slamming her lips shut.

Bodin nodded with his own smile. “She said no and asked if I’d gone mad because there was no way she could ever be the queen,” he said, remembering the way she’d rolled her eyes and scoffed at him. “She also thought it would be strange for us to be together… intimately, since we were such good friends. So, I suggested we experiment.”

Juniper’s jaw dropped. “You didn’t.”

“I did, and *she* kissed *me*.” It was over thirteen years ago, but he could still remember the way she’d stared at him in shock after. She had then shrugged and told him, *Fine. I guess you’ll do.* He had laughed and kissed her again, marveling at the desire in her eyes.

“Clearly, things went well.”

“Yes, they did. We were married a few months later and were very happy together.” He trailed off, unable to continue. Everyone knew the next part of the story. Camille had become pregnant almost right away, but she hadn’t made it through the birth of their son. Bodin still saw the blood in his nightmares. The baby hadn’t screamed or taken a breath; the only cries in the room were from his wife as they realized what had happened. He held her as she cradled the unmoving child who would never open his eyes.

Then, there was only silence.

Her bleeding hadn’t stopped.

And he was left alone.

“I’m so sorry.” Juniper shifted toward him, embracing him in a hug, and this time, he didn’t pull away. He put his arm around her as she said, “I can’t imagine losing someone like that. I… I’ve never had anyone like that in my life, but I know losing Rafe or Richard would hurt like hells. Even Hugo would break my heart, and he’s barely tolerated me for the last decade.”

Their lives growing up really were worlds apart. Despite his kingdom struggling with this war and the pressure from his father to be the best at everything, Bodin had never felt unloved. Sure, he’d been lonely at times, but it wasn’t because he didn’t have *anyone*. He’d always had his parents, Laurent, and Nadine, not to mention their respective families. Many of the noble families had cared for him too.

This beautiful, kind woman had *no one* but her brother and the guard who seemed to look out for her more like a parent than anything. He

wondered if Juniper saw how much the man adored her. It wasn't simply because it was his job that he stayed by her side.

Bodin glanced around the forest that had once been his sanctuary. "Maybe it was a bad idea to come here," he breathed.

She shook her head and stood. Tugging at his hand, she said, "No. It was a wonderful idea, and I'm glad you shared this space with me. It will always be for her, but that doesn't mean we can't enjoy it too. And if you ever feel the need to come here alone, I understand."

He let her pull him to his feet. "What are you doing?"

Giving him another glorious grin, she pulled him close. "Dance with me."

Bodin lifted her hand above her head to twirl her in a circle. Her soft giggle as she stumbled struck something deep within him. Something he never thought he would feel again. He wrapped an arm around her waist to steady her then swayed to the airy melody, a part of him feeling lighter simply by holding her.

Juniper stepped closer, resting her head on his shoulder. She seemed to do that more and more these days, and it made him wonder if she was feeling the same connection that he struggled to deny.

"Where does the music come from?" she asked in a hushed tone, as if not wanting to disrupt it.

"Magic," he managed to whisper through the ever-expanding lump in his throat.

"But how?" she asked. "And where are the people? I've yet to see anyone in these places."

He ran his fingers along her back.

Before he could answer either of her other questions, she asked, "How does it work? Can you create portals to anywhere? Could we use it to visit my home?"

Brushing his lips against the side of her head—another thing he seemed to be doing frequently, as it became impossible not to touch and comfort her—he knew it was time. "Let's go to another one and I'll explain."

ELEVEN

Juniper

It wasn't easy for Ronna to give her heart away. She feared showing her love after being taught for a millennia that it was a weakness. But the man she'd grown to care for didn't believe that was her only reason for not letting him in. He accused her of thinking less of humans. Because how could a goddess love a simple man? Yet, he never gave up. He fought to be by her side, trying to show his worthiness.

Juniper stood in the circular room, debating on which door to try next. Bodin had told her to pick, and then he would explain how they worked inside. They had decided to refer to them as numbers, starting with the meadow portal closest to the stairs as the first and moving counterclockwise. That way they could easily discuss them and explain which were being used.

Each place was unique and breathtaking, but one thing had started to stand out to her.

There were never people.

She hadn't seen a single person in her exploration. It hadn't dawned on her until she and Laurent ended up on the beach a couple days earlier and there was a gazebo set up for a picnic. Laurent had picked that one, but she'd been with him the entire day, and he'd never snuck off for any period of time, so she knew he wouldn't have been able to get that ready without her noticing. The food had been fresh, yet no one was around. There weren't footprints in the sand to show that anyone else had been there

either; there weren't any homes or shelters as far as she could see. It just didn't make sense.

Looking through the keys Bodin had returned to her, she stilled. She'd noticed each matched their door with a similar design, but one seemed to be missing. She counted the keys—eleven—then the portals. "Bo?"

"Yes?"

"There's a missing key. There isn't one for that door." She pointed to the last one. It had bare trees carved into it, making her think maybe it was a wintery forest. "There is a key for all the others. Where's that one?"

"That one is not to be used," a different voice said as footsteps echoed on the stairs.

She whirled around to find Laurent descending the last two steps. Nadine appeared behind him with a smile, and Richard followed behind her. But something was wrong. Laurent knew how much she'd wanted this time with Bodin; they'd spoken about it at length. He was the one who encouraged her to finally ask. And Richard had promised to stay upstairs.

"Why not?" Juniper asked.

His gaze flicked to Bodin's, so she faced her husband too. Bodin's jaw twitched. "Because it leads to a forest that's too dangerous to wander into."

"Can't you change the location? Make the portal open up in a different place?"

"It's not that simple," he said, shaking his head. His eyes remained on his friend, as if he too sensed something was off. "But I don't think I have time to explain right now."

Laurent nodded. "I need to borrow you for a little while, so I thought maybe Nadine could continue with Juni."

Juniper stepped closer and lowered her voice. "Is everything all right?"

"I'm sure it is," Bodin said. "But I need to find out what's going on."

She nodded, but she didn't like the look in his eyes. Instead, she turned toward Laurent. By now, she knew him well enough to see that whatever was happening was more serious than he was letting on. She didn't question either of them though. At this point in her life, she knew better. Even if they had treated her well since her arrival. She wouldn't push it. No matter how much she wanted to remind him that he'd said she would stand at his side.

Turning to Bodin once more, she whispered, "Be careful."

"I always am." His hand went to her back as he leaned in to kiss her forehead. "I'll meet you upstairs when we're done."

When he and Laurent left, Juniper faced the doors again. A thought struck through her worries, and she looked at Nadine. “You know about the portals?”

“I do. Bo showed them to me when he first created them a few years ago. He and Laurent would often bring me here with them, but then Bo stopped. Eventually, we did too. Until…”

“Until I got here?”

Nadine smiled. “He knew your past, about being kept hidden away, so he told us before you even came that he would share them if he came to trust you.”

Juniper sucked in a breath and then swallowed past the lump in her throat. “He gave me the keys the morning after the wedding.”

“I know.” Nadine moved closer to her side. “I know it’s only been a few weeks, but I can already see a difference in him. He’s been so reclusive for so long, even with us. It’s like meeting you brought him out of the shadows.”

“She has a tendency to do that,” Richard said in a soft tone.

Juniper turned toward him and, not caring how improper it was, moved to hug him, needing the comfort as she hid the tears welling in her eyes. He chuckled but wrapped his arms around her. After a moment, she pulled away and cleared her throat.

“Nadine, which is your favorite?”

She indicated the second portal. “This one is absolutely magical.”

“Then, let’s go there.” Juniper found the corresponding key.

Richard dipped his head in agreement. He glanced at the stairs, but not before she saw the concern in his gaze, and she knew he was thinking the same thing as her. Bodin and Laurent’s behavior had been suspicious.

She faced forward and went to unlock the portal, a plan forming in her mind. Opening the door, however, all thoughts fled from her. “Oh…”

“Exactly.” Nadine patted her on the shoulder and walked into the forest on the other side.

Juniper followed, stepping through to the deep green path. She’d never seen anything like this. With the sun filtering down, everything seemed so vibrant. Then, she heard it. The sounds of birds and running water, of small creatures living in the wild plants and trees. She reached for one of the bright pink flowers then paused. “Is this safe?”

She’d read about poisonous flora in the past.

“Everything here is safe,” Nadine said with a smile.

Juniper let out a sigh as she touched the soft petals. “And there are animals? Most of the others so far haven’t really had any, nor have there been people. The last one had fireflies, and I heard birds in the meadow but never saw them.”

“Only a couple have living creatures.”

“But why? How?”

Nadine hesitated, but before she could respond, something moved in the closest bush. Richard was there in an instant, pushing Juniper behind him. When he started to pull out his sword, Nadine said, “No, wait.”

A small animal appeared. It looked like a rodent but much, much bigger, with long brown hair. Juniper’s heart melted, and she moved around her guard to kneel. She slowly held out a hand. “Hi.”

It crept closer after a moment, letting her pet it.

“Oh goddess above,” she whispered as it sniffed her. “It’s so cute.”

“He is my favorite part about this place.” Nadine lowered next to them and ran a hand over the creature’s back. “When I was younger, I traveled with the royal family overseas to a kingdom in a similar jungle, and I saw one of these. I tried to convince my mother and Bo’s parents to let me keep and bring him back with me, but they said no. Bo was the one who told me it needed to stay in its home, and then when he discovered the ability to create these portals, he brought it to me.”

That seemed as good of a segue as any. Juniper continued stroking the animal that was now lying down, seemingly enjoying the attention “So, you’ve really known Bodin a long time, then.”

“My whole life,” she said. “My parents worked here—my mother is still the chef, but my father died when I was a child. Bo and Laurent kind of took me under their wing—Bo is ten years older than me, Laurent seven. Despite our age differences, they never acted like they didn’t want me around. They… treated me like a little sister they both cared for.”

Juniper couldn’t stop the burning in the back of her throat. Instead of focusing on the difference in their upbringings though, she said, “So, you must know you’re here to keep me distracted.”

It wasn’t a question, but Nadine nodded. Yet, she wouldn’t look at Juniper.

Her stomach twisted with unease. “Nadine, what’s going on? Do you know why they left?”

“He wouldn’t want you to worry—”

“Well, not knowing is just going to make that worse. What is it?”

Nadine finally met her gaze. “There was an attack in the village. A group of Gilarnian soldiers made it—Juniper, don’t!” she yelled as Juniper pushed to her feet and stormed toward the door before either of them could stop her.

“Juniper!” Richard shouted, making her still. He never used that tone with her, rarely did he call her by name in front of others.

Whipping around, she couldn’t hold back her frustration. “He said we were partners. That I would stand at his side, but the first time something major has happened, he left me behind. He’s hiding me away just like everyone else.”

“He’s not hiding you,” Nadine said. “He wants to protect you.”

She scoffed and pulled the door open. She’d heard that before too. Waiting for them to exit, she locked the portal then moved toward the stairs. “Is there an ongoing battle right now?”

When Nadine didn’t respond, Juniper paused to face her. Nadine shook her head. “Laurent was going into the village to help with the wounded and needed Bodin to know what was happening and to make a plan to build up our remaining defenses.”

She knew a lot more than Juniper expected.

“So, there’s not a threat currently?”

“There’s always a threat,” Richard said.

Juniper took a deep breath. “Then, come with me.” He looked like he wanted to argue, so she added, “Or I’ll make my way there alone. Your choice. Am I running *from* you or *with* you? Because either way, I’m going to find my husband. I will not sit by when I can help. Not anymore.”

TWELVE

Bodin

Love, it turned out, was a weakness. Ronna had finally given in and married the human she cared for dearly, giving him half a dozen children. She had grown to cherish her life with them, ruling her peaceful kingdom as her brothers continued their war for power. She loved her husband, her children, and her people more than she ever thought possible. Which only made it that much more painful when it was all taken away.

The sight of so many hurt and dying in the street broke Bodin's heart. He couldn't hesitate though. There wasn't time to waste.

"Get soldiers at the entrances to the city," he told Laurent as they made their way along one of the main roads. "River *and* road entrances."

Apparently, a group of about a dozen soldiers charged the city and caused mayhem. They'd set fire to a few homes and shops, attacking unarmed villagers with swords and the gods knew what other weapons.

His friend had explained what happened with the attack on their way out of the palace, and Bodin was glad Laurent had thought to bring Nadine and Richard to stay with Juniper when he came to find him. As much as Bodin hadn't wanted to leave Juniper, he needed to be here. He needed to be the king first.

Laurent took off without needing any more directions from him. That was why Bodin relied on him for so much. He wasn't officially a guard, and he refused to hold any real title, despite his birthright, but he was good at this. At taking the lead and directing people, at handling day-to-day tasks as

much as diplomatic situations. They worked well together, and Laurent knew how Bodin liked things done. But more than that, there was no one in this world he trusted more.

He still remembered finding out about Laurent's parents. When they passed, Laurent decided to join the army. He'd been so hopeless, so worn down by grief, that he felt like he had nothing left. But Bodin knew how that felt. He'd lost his younger brother just a couple of years earlier. And he'd refused to lose another, knowing how bad the war was getting in Valétoi. There was no way he would let Laurent go there to fight and die.

His own parents hadn't hesitated to take him in. They had always cared about him, and they understood how devastating it would have been for Bodin to lose another person. Little did he know he would lose so many more over the following years.

He paused in the middle of the street, staring in horror at villagers trying to help one another. Wounded and dying citizens lay scattered along the cobblestones, changing the stones' coloring from gray to rust from so much blood.

Seeing his people wounded and dying never got easier. The moans and cries ate away at Bodin's soul. The war in Valétoi had gone on for so long, but more and more often, the smaller villages throughout the kingdom were being attacked.

Now, they had struck the capital. His home.

This couldn't stand. He would need to join them at the front lines soon to help however he could. It had been too long since he visited the Valley of Stars himself.

More like the Valley of Death.

Bodin ran into the chaos and knelt by a man lying in a pool of blood. The man's eyes were shut, but his chest rose and fell in shallow breaths. Bodin searched for the cause of the bleeding.

"Can you tell me where you're wounded?" he asked. "What's your name?"

"Jonathan. My back," the man whispered between labored breaths. He appeared to be a villager who'd simply been going about his day by the looks of it. This never should have happened.

Bodin looked around for help. Spotting a woman finishing with another injured citizen, he called out to get her attention. She rushed over with a bag of supplies. Seeing him up close, she hesitated, her eyes widening. Whether

it was shock from seeing the king out here helping or fear of the ruler they called a monster, he didn't know. He couldn't think about it at the moment though. They needed to focus on healing this man.

"I'm going to roll him over. Can you see what's wrong with his back?" Bodin reached for Jonathan's shoulder and hip. The woman nodded, and he pulled. Jonathan shouted in pain, but neither stopped.

"It's a gash, sliced through his tunic and everything," she said, grabbing strips of cloth from her bag. "I think he needs to be stitched up, but I… I don't really know how…"

That was when Bodin realized just how young she was; she couldn't have been older than twenty. Nodding, he asked for her name too. His father had once told him and Elias that it was vital as a royal to ask for names. It made people feel seen and heard.

"Inaya."

"All right, Inaya, I need you to come on this side and take my spot." Bodin shifted to give her room. "Hold him over like this and try not to let him move. Do you have a needle in your bag?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. These were my mother's supplies; she was a healer."

Bodin didn't miss her use of the past tense. Once she had a solid hold on Jonathan, he searched for what he needed. Grabbing the needle, he looked for a way to sterilize it. The Shadow Star Inn was a few buildings away. That would have to do.

"I will be right back. Don't move." He ran to the inn and straight to the wall of liquor in the tavern area. Snatching a bottle of a clear alcohol, he returned to the two in the street. He would pay the innkeeper for it later.

Lowering to the ground, he uncorked the glass bottle and poured some of the alcohol over the needle, making sure not to use too much. He had a feeling he would need more by the time the night was over.

One after another, he helped bandage, stitch, and move his injured people. These weren't soldiers prepared for battle. They were shopkeepers, bakers, elderly, children. They were families. His stomach twisted as he came upon a father crying over his dead wife and young daughter.

Grief coursed through Bodin. He could practically feel the sorrow of his people consuming his own heart. It was too much. They hadn't expected this, and now they were suffering. Because of him. Because he hadn't been prepared. He hadn't been able to end this war.

And Gilarn hadn't shown any amount of mercy today.

That was why, when he spotted one of *their* soldiers alive and lying at the mouth of an alley, he didn't hesitate to go make sure the man survived. He wanted answers. His wounds weren't too bad—broken ribs and a slice in his arm. Bodin waved over a couple of his own soldiers. "Take him to the dungeons to be questioned."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

As they hauled him away, Bodin crossed his arms and exhaled. He hated this part of the job, but if it meant protecting his people, he would do it. He would make sure the enemy lived long enough to be interrogated. Even if it blackened his already dark soul more.

"Your Majesty," a rough voice said.

Bodin angled toward an older man, ready to lend his aid.

But the man surprised him by saying, "You shouldn't be out here. It's too dangerous."

It was rare that anyone spoke to him as such. While those here in Kehlir were better than the rest of the kingdom because they knew him better, too many still believed the worst of him. They didn't care what happened to him. So, it surprised him that a villager would voice this concern.

He opened his mouth, but the man cut him off.

"Neither should she." He looked over Bodin's shoulder.

His stomach sank, knowing who he would see before even moving. He'd been so consumed by his surroundings that he hadn't noticed her leaving the portal she had entered with Nadine and Richard. But sure enough, he whipped around and caught sight of his wife wringing her hands as she took in what had happened.

"Burning hells," he groaned, storming toward Juniper. At least Richard had followed her. Still, he didn't want her to see this. He didn't want her holding the burden and weight that he did. And he *really* didn't want her in danger.

Before he could reach her and insist she go home, she moved to kneel beside a young man who sat on the edge of the street holding his bleeding head. Bodin stopped in his tracks. She didn't appear to care that her dress skirts lay in the dirt beneath her, nor did it seem to bother her to see the cut in the man's brow when she pulled his hand away. Juniper simply turned, searching for something.

“I need water, cloth, and bandages,” she shouted as Inaya walked by her. The girl handed over her satchel then ran off, presumably to get water.

Bodin watched in awe as Juniper comforted the man while they waited. Richard lowered beside her. The entire scene had Bodin frozen on the spot, staring in awe. His first wife, Camille, had been the daughter of a duke—raised prim and proper. She’d enjoyed nature and the simpler things in life, but she was still a lady. His second wife was born to a noble family as well, and she had a habit of thinking she was better than everyone. Never would she have knelt in the dirty street to help a dying man. Camille *might* have tried, but she wouldn’t have known what to do, and the blood would have nauseated her.

Yet, Juniper acted like she didn’t even notice the filth and grime.

When Inaya brought the water a moment later, Juniper didn’t hesitate to clean and wrap the man’s head with her aid. It wasn’t the best job, but it would get him through the night. Then, they were up and carrying the supplies to the next person.

Juniper’s eyes caught on Bodin as he finally closed the distance between them. She held up a hand. “Don’t.”

“What?” he asked, kneeling to help her roll a woman onto her side so Inaya could see the wound in the back of her shoulder.

“You can yell at me for coming down here later.”

He shook his head. “I wasn’t going to yell at you, June.”

The nickname just slipped out, but she didn’t seem to notice.

She glared at him. “Fine, but after we’re done, *I’m* going to yell at *you*.”

Inaya gasped, likely in shock that someone dared to speak to him that way. He just chuckled. “And why, my dear wife, are you mad at me?”

“Because you said we were in this together,” she hissed. “But instead of trusting me enough to tell me what happened and where you were going, you and Laurent used Nadine to distract me. How am I supposed to stand by your side if you don’t even let me know these things?”

Bodin stared at her, his smile slipping. She was right. About all of it. He might not have known about the attack when Laurent first arrived, but he’d known something was wrong. He should have, at the very least, asked for the details while she was there. It had been a long time since he’d let anyone in like that. Since he trusted someone other than Laurent and Nadine.

He'd never let Beatrice in that far. Even Camille, who'd been his friend first… he had kept information from her to protect her, and because she simply didn't want to be involved.

Bodin had always considered her the love of his life, his one chance at true happiness. But minute by minute, Juniper was creeping into his heart. And he couldn't help but wonder if maybe people were given more than one chance.

If maybe they were given a chance at more.

Whatever this was with Juniper—this magnetic pull toward her—it was different than anything he'd ever felt. He'd loved Camille, but it hadn't consumed him like June's mere presence did.

They finished patching up the woman and got her on her feet, and then Inaya helped her get inside the inn, where many of the injured were sitting to rest before finding their way home. Juniper started to turn, but Bodin put an arm out to stop her, hooking it around her stomach.

He pulled her back to his front and lowered his voice, his lips brushing her ear as he spoke. "I'm sorry. You're right; I should've kept you with me while finding out what happened."

"Why didn't you?"

Sighing, he turned her to face him, still holding her close, and said, "Because I'm not used to having another person in my life that I should share things with. It's not that I don't trust you."

Though, he didn't fully trust her. Not yet. He wanted to, but how could he? They'd only known each other for a few weeks.

But he trusted her more than he ever imagined possible.

He didn't say any of that though. There was no need. She probably felt the same.

Bodin swept a thumb across her cheek. "I also wanted to make sure you were safe because I wasn't sure what we were dealing with."

"If you'd just told me that—"

"You would have argued your way into coming with me," he said, interrupting her. "I might not know you well, but I know that much. I've seen that spark in you. And if that didn't work, you would have snuck away from your guard to come here on your own."

Her eyes narrowed, and he leaned down further with a smirk.

"Thank you for letting him come with you." Bodin didn't miss the way her hands rested on his chest or the way her fingers curled in ever so

slightly. For nearly three weeks, he'd slept in a separate bed and kept his distance, but Juniper was slipping past his defenses so easily. It was impossible not to be drawn to her. He knew from that first morning after the wedding that he wanted to let her in. After all, that was why he'd given her his keys without hesitation. There was just something about her. It felt as if they had known each other for much longer.

His heart screamed at him not to do this. He needed to keep her at a distance for both of their sakes. Everyone he loved had a habit of dying. He couldn't fall for her only to lose her; he didn't think he would survive another loss like that. And he had a feeling that losing her would be worse than anything he'd ever experienced before. Just thinking about it churned his stomach and made it hard to breathe evenly. The only reason Laurent and Nadine remained close to him was because they were stubborn and wouldn't let him push them away. He'd tried.

"Contrary to popular belief," Juniper said, "I'm not an idiot. I didn't know if there was still fighting going on either, and I wasn't about to run head first into battle without any real training."

"I never thought—"

"Help! Please, someone!" a man shouted, and they both turned toward the commotion. He was carrying a young woman in his arms who appeared unconscious.

And just like that, they were jumping back into the fray to help their people.

Side by side.

THIRTEEN

Juniper

In the dead of night, Ronna lost her husband first. Not by the war. Not by another's hands. It was illness and old age that took him. That was when the truth of her situation truly set in.

Juniper's feet dragged as she made her way into the inn they had set up for people to rest. She could barely keep her eyes open. Looking for a clock, she wondered how close the sun was to rising. For hours, she had cleaned and wrapped wounds, helped set bones, and assisted people back to their homes. She wasn't a healer by any means, but she could follow instructions and she was a quick learner.

Stepping close to the fire burning in the stone hearth, she stretched her aching back. The main floor of the inn had a dozen or so tables for meals and drinks, as well as settees and chairs around the warm open room. Most of those seats were occupied by those who'd been helping all night or those who had lost their homes in one way or another. Apparently, the Gilarnians had decided it wasn't enough to just attack those in the streets. They'd looted places, smashed others. Fires had roared to life, but the villagers managed to put most out before more than a few homes were completely destroyed.

Many of the men and women in here now had their eyes shut, savoring this moment of quiet. Richard and a couple of Bodin's guards were a few steps away, discussing next moves.

“Here, this will help,” the innkeeper said—an older woman with kind brown eyes and graying hair piled high upon her head—approaching with a steaming mug.

“Thank you.” Juniper took it and inhaled the rich, earthy aromas. Sipping at it, she let the cider warm her from the inside out.

“Your Majesty,” she said, but not to her. Juniper looked up to find Bodin joining them. “Can I get you anything?”

He shook his head with what Juniper knew was a rare smile. “No, thank you. I’m fine.”

She dipped into a low curtsy and left them alone. Juniper took another drink of the cider. A quiet moan slipped out, and Bodin tensed. She caught him, not for the first time, staring at her lips.

“Hasn’t anyone told you not to accept food or drinks from strangers?” her husband said in a soft voice as he inched closer.

Juniper stilled with her lips on the edge of the mug. She lowered it, her heart beginning to race.

“No, you’re fine,” Bodin added. “You can trust Francine, and most of the people here, but you need to be cautious. Especially with attacks getting closer like this.”

She nodded, feeling like a fool, and lowered her gaze. When his hand landed on her shoulder, she sighed with relief. She still wasn’t quite used to physical touch after spending so many years on her own, and Bodin touched a lot. It was like he was trying to find excuses to be close with how often he held her hand, put an arm around her, kissed her cheek or head. Juniper liked it far more than she should. She longed for those gestures, the soft brushes of his fingers against her skin. His arms encircling her, holding her to him.

He cut into her thoughts. “Come on, I’ll get a carriage to take you home.”

“I’m fine,” she said, lifting her chin.

He gave her a disbelieving look. “You look about ready to fall asleep standing up, June.”

She’d heard the nickname earlier and wondered if it had been a mistake. Now that it was clearly intentional, her heart pattered harder in her chest. Her brothers had called her *Juni* growing up—at least, Rafe and Hugo had. And on occasion, Delroy, but she rarely spoke to him. He was second-in-line to the throne after Rafe, but he didn’t care about any of that. As far as

she knew, he spent most of his time training with the Forossan army and was rumored to be the best swordsman in the realm. Even Richard used *Juni* from time to time when it was just the two of them.

June, however, was different. It felt more mature. And it was all Bodin's. No one else had ever used it.

She noticed the redness in his eyes, the pure exhaustion in his stance. "So do you."

"I'm the king; I need to stay," he said. "But you should go home and get some rest."

"And I'm the queen. Together, remember?" She turned to set her mug on a nearby table then hooked an arm through his. "If you're staying to help, so am I."

Sighing, he shook his head. "You're impossible."

Juniper waited for him to make his decision. He clenched his jaw, and she smiled as he began leading her toward the door. She would take the victory where she could. Glancing back, she signaled to Richard that they were leaving. He followed them outside, where two other guards stood at attention.

They walked down the now-quiet street until Bodin spotted Laurent, who appeared just as tired as she felt.

"Are the perimeters secured?" Bodin asked by way of greeting.

"Yes. Everything is as you ordered. We'll be alerted should they try again."

"Good."

Laurent ran a hand through his hair. "We didn't have enough people on duty because we didn't think they would make it this far to attack here. But with the added men from Forosse, they were able to act fairly quickly."

"How far away is the valley?" Juniper asked, wondering how or why they came this far with so few numbers. What had they hoped to accomplish?

"Two or three days by horse." Bodin used his free hand to cover the one Juniper had tucked in his elbow. To Laurent, he said, "We're going home for a while to rest. You should do the same."

His friend gave a soft chuckle. "She actually convinced you to leave?"

"It appears so." Bodin met her gaze in the streetlight, but she couldn't read his dark expression.

“You need sleep just as much as everyone else,” she said, not backing down. “You’ve been here all night. What good can you do if you work until you can’t keep your eyes open?”

“I knew I liked you,” Laurent said with a wink before adding, “Listen to her, Bo. She’s not wrong.”

As if on cue, the king yawned and nodded. “I know. Fine, we’re leaving. We’ll check in around lunchtime.”

Juniper waited until they were through the palace gates and relatively alone to whisper, “We?”

“Hmm?” Bodin shifted to put his arm around her waist, and she leaned into his side, grateful for the support. Her legs ached tremendously and threatened to quit holding her up any second.

“You said *we’ll* check in.” She rested her head on his shoulder as they made their way to the entrance. “Does that mean you’ll let me go with you instead of trying to distract me with magical portal lands?”

She said the last bit quiet enough not to be overheard. Since she’d started exploring them, she quickly realized they were truly a secret. And she had no intention of being the one to tell others about his power to create them.

“I don’t think I need to *let* you do anything,” he said, his voice full of amusement. “I think you’ll do whatever you want.”

Juniper relaxed at his tone. She’d heard stories growing up of men not liking headstrong women, and she’d always feared that even if she made it out of that tower and married, her husband wouldn’t allow such behavior. She feared he would try to stifle her. But Bodin wasn’t like that. In fact, he seemed to enjoy it.

For the first time in her life, Juniper felt as if she could be her truest self. She felt the sort of freedom she’d never expected, much less hoped for.

When Bodin released her and headed inside the palace, she tried not to show her disappointment to the guards and anyone else who might have seen them. She didn’t want to admit, even to herself, that she craved his touch. It scared her to think about how much it gave her a sense of security. It made her feel protected.

It made her feel loved. Even though she knew that wasn’t the case here, she could see that he at least cared for her a little bit.

Bodin paused just inside and seemed to consider something as she stopped next to him.

“I’d rather you be with me so I know you’re safe than sneaking around,” he said in a low tone as he laced their fingers between them. He did it slowly, with hesitation for once, as if worried about her reaction.

Her stomach fluttered, but she squeezed his palm gently and nodded. Despite how they were brought together, despite not wanting to marry this man, she couldn’t deny how right it felt to walk alongside him. How much she appreciated his trust and respect and friendship.

Because there was no doubt in her mind that Bodin was her friend at this point. She cared about him, his people. *Their* people. And he’d shared a massive secret with her.

Guilt coursed through her, but she shoved it down. When talking with him those first few nights, she’d shared a great deal about herself, but not everything. She’d mostly told him the basics, the watered-down version of her life. It was too soon to give it all, to tell him just how difficult the past had been, why it had been so rough. She wasn’t ready to talk about those things out loud just yet. Maybe one day…

Maybe one day, she would admit that she had been hurt by her father essentially selling her to a stranger. But that it had also excited her because it meant leaving that wretched life behind once and for all.

Maybe one day, she would admit that she’d planned to run away the night of the wedding. That she’d had enough and could no longer live this secretive life. Until Bodin pulled her aside and spoke to her, promised her freedom. Until his kindness convinced her to give this a chance, no matter how much it scared her. Because even if she ran away, she would still be alone. And she couldn’t stand the loneliness anymore.

One day, she would tell him the full story of why she was locked away all those years ago and why her family eventually distanced themselves.

She wanted to be honest with him, especially when he had shared so much of himself, but it also terrified her.

FOURTEEN

Juniper

Ronna didn't age. But her new family did. Her children had grown, albeit at a slower rate than most humans due to the power she had passed down, and started families of their own, yet she still appeared as a young adult. The same as when she'd first taken a human form. And she realized in horror, that her loved ones would keep dying over and over for the rest of time, taking a piece of herself with each one.

Juniper and Bodin walked upstairs to their bedroom in silence, her hand still in his larger one. Pausing at the door, she looked over her shoulder. "You should get some rest too," she said to Richard. "I'll see you later."

"Goodnight, Your Majesties." He inclined his head but hesitated after one step. Meeting Juniper's gaze, he whispered, "I'm proud of you, Juniper. Even though you took off against my wishes, as usual, you did well out there."

Her vision blurred. She didn't think she had ever heard those words. From anyone. "Thank you."

Nodding, he asked, "Shall I get Nadine to help you get ready for bed?"

"I think I can handle it from here," Bodin said, effectively making her blush and her breath catch.

Through that, she smiled at Richard. "I'm fine. Goodnight."

As soon as the door shut behind them, Bodin's shoulders drooped. His entire posture changed, showing the exhaustion and heartbreak weighing him down. The sky had started to lighten, shifting the atmosphere to a haze

of blue. It was so peaceful, so contrasting to the devastation they had dealt with all night.

Bodin went and knelt by the hearth to stoke the fire back to life as she hung her cloak over a chair. She watched him stand, but he didn't turn. He stared at the slowly growing flames, the embers turning his face a dark shade of red.

"Bo." Her chest ached at the sight of his evident pain, and she couldn't help but go to him. Taking a chance, she angled in front of him to wrap an arm around his middle. "I'm going to write to my father right away."

She didn't know if he'd bother to listen to her pleas, but she had to try. She would write to Rafe too. If she couldn't get through to their father, perhaps he could.

Bodin returned the embrace but kept quiet.

"We need more soldiers. A battalion or two at the front lines isn't enough, especially if this many are getting through to attack elsewhere. There needs to be more. We need them here and in other villages. It's not enough." She couldn't stop rambling. "There has to be something we can do to protect them."

The king lifted her chin to look at him.

"What?" she whispered when he only watched her.

"You said *we*," he echoed her earlier words.

She swallowed past the tightness in her throat. "We're a team now. You and me."

"You and me," he repeated, sliding his hand back to cup the side of her neck. She wet her lips, and his eyes darted down to them, lingering there. He leaned in a fraction, and she wondered if he would finally kiss her. Finally take her as his wife. But he stopped a breath away.

There was so much agony in his eyes. She knew he was scared of letting people in because he'd lost so much already. It wasn't difficult to piece that much together. This pull between them was strong though, and she didn't know how long they could keep fighting it. She couldn't keep pretending she didn't notice his presence as soon as he entered a room, even without looking. She couldn't deny how much easier it was to breathe when he was with her. Staring into her eyes as if he already cherished her.

Against all odds, she was fairly certain she was falling in love with her husband.

“June,” he whispered. She nodded, hoping he understood it was more than permission. It was a request.

And he didn’t deny her.

His lips brushed along hers, a ghost of a caress. Standing on her toes, she put more pressure into the kiss, needing more. His tongue darted out, and she opened for him as his hand slid into her hair. *Goddess above*. This was what she’d wanted for days now. Longer, if she was being honest with herself.

His other hand tightened around her waist, holding her as close as possible. She’d only ever been touched like this by one other man. But the times she’d kissed that sailor a couple of years ago weren’t like *this*. It had never set her body aflame.

She was burning like an ember in the night. Like the fire growing in the hearth at her back. With each stroke of Bodin’s tongue against hers, it was as if he was building the flames up, higher and higher. She was going to burst. She was going to…

Gasping, she tore herself away and covered her mouth with one hand.

Bodin’s eyes widened. “I’m sorry.”

She closed her eyes and steadied her breathing, willing herself to stop panicking. Tears rolled down her cheeks before she could stop them. A shaky breath escaped her.

“Juniper.” Bodin reached to pull her hands down before his palm returned to her cheek; she gave in and looked at him. “Shh. It’s all right.” His thumbs brushed the wetness from her face before he leaned in to kiss her brow. He pulled her into his arms. “We can stop. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“No, don’t apologize. I wanted to,” she said, trying to come up with the words to explain her sudden need to pull away. “I just don’t know if I’m ready for… more. It was… overwhelming.”

“That’s fine.” Releasing her, he took a step backward—much to her chagrin.

“It’s just… It’s never been like that before.”

With those words, his shoulders relaxed. She hoped he understood it was him but rather these consuming feelings.

Juniper wanted to believe him about it being fine to wait, but for so long, she had been told that this was her duty. She was supposed to comfort him, be his to use, essentially. “Unless you need me to. If we have to—”

“We don’t have to do anything.” He glanced from her to the large bed then to the bathtub up on the platform in the corner of the room. “Do you need help washing the dirt and blood off?”

She hadn’t even thought of that. Having him there while she bathed felt like too much, so instead, she shook her head. “I’d honestly rather just sleep and take a bath later.”

At least she had already cleaned her hands. Bodin nodded and began removing his cloak. “Then, I’ll help you with your dress so you can go to bed.”

He placed the cloak on the back of the chair with hers while she sat to tug off her boots. When he knelt in front of her to take over, Juniper chewed on her lip. She couldn’t stop herself from reaching out to touch his cheek, to trace his scars. As he looked up, she wondered again how anyone could think this man was a monster. In their short time together, Bodin had cared for her more than most of the people throughout her life had.

The thought made her miss her mother. When Juniper was a child, her mother had been very affectionate. She’d spent so much time caring for her and Hugo. Her other brothers didn’t share the same mother—she was their father’s second wife—yet she had always loved them as her own too. But it was different with Juniper and Hugo. They were her babies, and she didn’t want to leave them with nannies and nursemaids and miss out on those precious years.

Things had drastically changed though. Juniper went from seeing her mother every day, even in the tower, to only getting visits a couple of times a week. Then, it was once or twice each month. It became less and less frequent over time, until she only came to see Juniper on her birthday and Unity Day.

Juniper still didn’t know if Bodin’s behavior was genuine, but right now, she couldn’t believe it wasn’t. Not as he stood and led her toward the bed in silence. Not as he turned her around, gently pulled her hair over one shoulder, and began unlacing her dress.

Juniper didn’t argue. She didn’t try to stop him. She didn’t want to. For the first time in her life, she was truly hopeful for the future. The war frightened her, and she desperately wanted to help Bodin’s people, but there was still a glimmer of something she hadn’t realized she was missing until now.

Happiness.

She was happy here.

Bodin turned around as she let her dress fall to the floor. In only her shift and pantalettes, she slipped into bed and pulled the covers over her. He picked up the soiled garment and put it with the cloaks before heading toward the attached bedroom. “Goodnight.”

“Bo?”

He stilled at the door. “Yes?”

When she didn’t respond right away, he faced her once more. With a deep breath, she asked the question she’d been holding back for days. “Will you stay with me?”

His gaze held hers as he slowly returned to what should have been *their* bed. “Are you sure?”

She nodded, unable to speak.

A long minute passed before he seemed to come to a decision. She clenched her jaw as he began removing his own boots and clothes. His bare chest was a sight of beauty, defined and muscular. She’d glimpsed a peek of it before, but she’d yet to see him like this up close. Her mouth watered. He looked like one of the statues of the gods down in the art gallery.

“Still sure?” he asked with a twinkle in his eyes, standing in nothing but his undergarments. He tore the band from his hair, and the inky locks tumbled to his shoulders.

She couldn’t breathe, and she was grateful it was still dark enough that he wouldn’t be able to see her red face. This was a horrible idea. How was she supposed to lay next to him and keep her hands to herself? Granted, the bed was large enough to stay far apart. Swallowing, she managed to whisper, “Yes.”

With a softer smile, he climbed into bed. It was so wide that another couple of people could fit in here comfortably with them, and she found that she hated the chasm between them. She glanced across the space at him, wishing he would move closer. But she knew he wouldn’t, not after she’d been the one to stop them earlier. If she wanted this, she would need to make it happen.

Juniper tried to scoot closer nonchalantly but failed. Her intent was obvious, and he turned his head to watch her with that smirk she was starting to adore. Internally groaning, she gave up all pretenses and moved to lie next to him. She rolled onto her side, putting her back to him as she said, “Not a word.”

His deep chuckle sent a shiver down to her toes. The mattress shifted, and then he was there, pressed against her backside with his arm draped across her waist. A gentle pressure touched her head—*a kiss*, she thought. “Goodnight, June.”

She thought it would be a tense situation, lying beside him, that she would be nervous and uncomfortable, but the opposite seemed to be true. She’d never felt more at home than she did in this moment. “Goodnight, Bo.”

FIFTEEN

Bodin

When her daughter grew weathered and ill, Ronna gave in and went to her brother. She begged Theran to help her, to use his light to save her only remaining child. She pleaded with him, but he refused. So, she went to Eryx instead, to see if he could make her immortal like them. But he was no help either.

'Your daughter is old and gray,' he'd said. 'She has lived a full life. She has had her own children and grandchildren. It is time to let her go.'

Waking up with Juniper in his arms was a new kind of torture. She must've rolled over in her sleep and now lay curled against his bare chest, almost glowing in the late morning light. The blankets had been shoved down at one point because of the added body heat, which meant he could see her thin shift. And it did *not* leave much to the imagination.

He was already hard, but now, seeing the way the fabric had bunched at the dip in her waist, revealing her upper thighs and the edge of her pantalettes… Bodin clenched his jaw and tried to focus on his breathing instead of the very thin material separating her breasts from his skin. He needed to get out of this bed, but he didn't want to just leave her.

"Bo?" her soft voice said without opening her eyes. "Why are you so tense?"

"I… need to go take care of something." He had one arm around her, but he barely managed to keep his other hand to himself.

“Just a few more minutes.” Juniper snuggled into him, her arm going across his stomach.

And then, her leg lifted to drape over his. She was practically lying on top of him. Whether it was to hold him there or because she was still partially asleep and unaware of her actions didn’t matter. What mattered was that she had brushed his cock through his undergarments, and a groan left his lips before he could stop it.

Her brow furrowed as she opened her eyes to look up at him. “What’s wrong? Did I hurt you?”

Any other day, he might have laughed. “No, love. But I need to get up.”

“Why?”

Had anyone explained human anatomy to her? She knew about sex on their wedding night, but he realized that in their discussion, she hadn’t mentioned anything specific. All of her knowledge came from books and overhearing gossip. That was what she’d said.

He sighed. “Because I am a man who likes women, and a very attractive one is currently lying against me in very little clothing. And if she doesn’t get off of me soon, she’s going to feel something I don’t think she’s ready for yet. Especially with her leg so close to the current situation.”

The crease in her brow deepened for a second before her eyes glanced down and saw the evidence for herself. With the blankets lowered, there was no hiding the tent in his pants. Her eyes widened, but to his surprise, she didn’t immediately pull away.

“Does it hurt?” she whispered.

“It might if I don’t take care of it.” He lifted a hand to cover it, but she reached out and stopped him, grabbing his wrist. “June…”

Her body was still firmly pressed against him, and he found himself playing with the ends of her hair with his free hand. The more she stared at him, the more his pulse quickened. He wanted her so badly. There was no denying it. The physical desire was never the issue though. The problem was that he couldn’t give her his shattered heart. It wasn’t fair to her.

“You should take care of it.” She met his gaze and visibly swallowed. “I don’t want you in pain.”

Gods save me. “Exactly. So, I should go—”

“Show me,” she whispered to his horror—or was it delight?

The look on her face, the vulnerability and excitement, made it impossible for him to deny her, so he turned his arm, making her release

him… only to grab her hand instead. Slowly, he guided her to his hardness. Her breaths grew unsteady. As did his. He stopped playing with her hair and instead let his fingers drift to her hip. With their joined hands, he showed her how to grip him, moving her palm up and down his length. He fought to keep his eyes open and on her. There was no way he was missing a second of this.

Juniper squeezed him slightly then stilled as he groaned. “Sorry.”

“No,” he said through his teeth. “Do it again. More, June.”

Bodin released her hand, and she started pleasuring him on her own. He reached to tilt her chin up and brought his lips down to hers. She kept rubbing him, stealing every other thought from his mind. Her tongue brushed across his, and he deepened the kiss. Her hand moved quicker, more confident as she seemed to learn what he liked.

“Fuck,” he hissed, breaking the kiss. He put his forehead to hers. “Don’t stop, June. I’m… Oh, gods. I’m going to come, Juniper. Don’t stop.”

She didn’t. His beautiful wife smiled and continued to build him up until he couldn’t take it anymore. Until he was groaning and twitching in her palm, releasing harder than he had in a really long time, if ever.

Bodin clenched his jaw as he spilled into his pants. Her hand slowed, but she didn’t remove it. Finally, he closed his eyes, attempting to calm down and steady his breathing.

After a moment, she said, “Was that…”

“Perfect,” he said between breaths. He had no other words for it.

When he looked at her once more, her cheeks were flushed. She had her lower lip between her teeth until she asked, “I did it right?”

“Yes.” He chuckled, sliding his hand into her hair. “You were incredible, my dear wife.”

The only thing that would’ve been better was coming inside her instead. But starting here was more than fine. If this was what she needed—to take it one step at a time—he could do that. He could teach her all about pleasure.

“Now, it’s your turn.” Bodin shifted, rolling them until she was on her back, and she let out an amused squeal that went straight to his heart. Just like her grin did when he hovered over her and slowly started tugging one of her sleeves off of her shoulder. He leaned down to kiss her collarbone while his fingers began exploring her curves. The feel of her beneath him as he lowered between her legs was so… *right*.

“Bodin, wait,” she said in a breathy voice. “We need to talk about something first.”

He froze, not liking that statement. He met her gaze and waited, their bodies pressed together. “What?”

Juniper licked her lips, and he could see the concern haunting her. Before he could address it or find out what was going through that pretty head of hers, however, a knock sounded and the door opened a second later.

“Just me,” Nadine said, strolling in and stilled at the sight of them. “Oh, sharing a bed now?”

“Impeccable timing as always, Nadine.” He glared over his shoulder at her.

“You were supposed to be up by now,” she argued. “How was I to know you were still in here? I’ve been helping her for two weeks, and you’re never—”

“All right, all right.” Bodin let out a frustrated breath and rolled onto his back—thanking the gods that at least she hadn’t barged in on them a few minutes earlier.

Juniper smiled uncomfortably next to him, pulling the hem of her nightgown down from where it had risen high on her thighs. Her cheeks were still flushed, and if Nadine paid more attention, she would know they were up to something other than kissing in bed.

His wife met his gaze, and she seemed to relax. He leaned over to peck her cheek, hoping she didn’t regret what just happened. He sure as hells didn’t.

He wanted so much more.

Nadine frowned at their clothes hanging over the chair and the state of the dirty sheets. “You know what my favorite part about you two *not* sleeping together was? Not having to deal with the bedding each morning. It’s bad enough knowing what I’ll be cleaning up, but now you’re adding dirt and blood to the mix?”

“We were too tired to bathe after helping in the village all night.” Juniper sat up, and Bodin returned the sleeve of her nightgown to its proper place before putting a hand on her back. As if it was the most natural thing in the world. Something he did every day. His stomach churned as he realized he wouldn’t *mind* doing it every day. He wanted to wake up beside her each morning, discovering new ways to make her blush and come undone.

“Well, let’s get you clean now.” Nadine went to ring one of the bells near the tub that would call for hot water. “Bo, are you… sharing?” she asked hesitantly. She hadn’t been Camille or Beatrice’s lady’s maid—she’d been too young at the time. This was new territory for them. “If so, I’ll step out once the water is here.”

He looked at Juniper who crossed her arms to hug herself. Gone was the confident woman who just got him off. Shaking his head, he said, “Not this time.”

Later. They would continue this after visiting the village and after Juniper said what she needed to. He would wait until she was ready.

And then, he would lock that fucking door so no one could interrupt them again.

Despite not wanting to leave their bed, Bodin was glad they had. They needed to return to the streets of Kehlir, to the people who’d been hurt under his care.

Juniper stayed at his side, with Richard and Samuel following as usual. She didn’t hesitate to jump in where needed. They helped bring water and food to those who couldn’t get it themselves, checked on wounds, and talked to the soldiers posted throughout the main part of the city standing guard.

He found it a little easier to talk to the villagers today. With Juniper at his side, it didn’t seem as daunting. Guilt still coursed through him, especially with so many injured, displaced, or dead, but there was also pride. His people had rallied together last night. They had set aside any differences and worked side by side to protect this place and take care of each other, along with help from the men sent by Juniper’s father.

Though, in truth, Bodin had hoped for more. Only a couple dozen had arrived the week before, and it wasn’t enough to fully protect the city of thousands. But it helped. And it meant that even more had gone to the valley instead.

As Bodin and Juniper left one of the bridge posts, they spotted Laurent talking to the girl who’d helped them the previous night, Inaya. The healer’s daughter. He needed to thank her, make sure she was all right. She’d hinted

that her mother had passed, but he wasn't sure if it was in the attack or before. Did she have any other family to look after her?

Juniper slipped her hand into Bodin's and asked as they approached, "Does he ever sleep?"

Of course, Laurent heard and grinned. He opened his mouth, no doubt to reply with a crass flirtation about going to bed for other reasons, but Juniper cut him off.

"Nope, don't answer that." She shook her head. "No inappropriate responses in front of the young and innocent." When she pointed to the girl, Bodin couldn't help but chuckle. He coughed to hide it but knew it didn't work. Juniper glared up at him.

Leaning down, he whispered into her ear, "You're one to talk."

She elbowed him in the stomach as Inaya said, "I'm nineteen, not a child."

"Oh, she's a feisty one," Laurent said. "Can we keep her too?"

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" Juniper asked without missing a beat. "Someone else to irritate?"

Bodin laughed harder and kissed the side of her head, especially with Inaya's look of shock and horror at their interaction. But he was thoroughly enjoying the fact that she wasn't afraid to give it right back to Laurent when he was being obnoxious. He adored this woman. He definitely wanted to keep *her*.

The thought made his breath catch in his throat.

In the background, he heard Laurent pretend Juniper had hurt him. They playfully argued and teased each other. But Bodin couldn't join in. His best friend and wife were friends who seemed to genuinely care about one another. She had grown close with Nadine too. In such a short amount of time, Juniper had become so ingrained into every aspect of his life. She was a part of him, whether he liked it or not.

And that was the problem.

He did like it.

He loved it.

Here he was, standing in the middle of his city, laughing and smiling where anyone could see him. She made him open up. Because of her, he felt the first shreds of happiness in six years.

Juniper didn't simply make him happy though. It was much bigger than that.

She made him *want* to be happy. To live his life away from the shadows and grief. She made him want things beyond ending this war and doing what he could for his people.

She made him want to hope, to dream of a future.

"Your Majesty, are you all right?" Inaya asked, interrupting the other two, who snapped their attention to him.

Bodin took a deep breath and met Juniper's gaze. He squeezed her hand with a nod, telling himself this time would be different. "Yes. I'm wonderful."

Because by some miracle, the universe had brought Juniper to him. He'd needed her father's soldiers, yes, but he was fairly certain he needed *her* more. Whether it was by the goddess, another entity, or the stars themselves, Juniper was sent to him.

He'd found the one person in this world who made him want to love again.

SIXTEEN

Juniper

1 WEEK LATER…

In her grief, Ronna couldn't listen to reasoning. All she knew was that neither brother would help her. And that her father had been right. Love was more powerful than magic, more dangerous. Magic could affect the body and world, but love changed the heart and soul.

Love could destroy everything.

As much as she enjoyed her time with Laurent and Nadine, Juniper had been eager to travel through the portals with her husband again. She knew visiting the glimmering forest was painful for him, but she meant it when she said she didn't mind hearing about his past wives. He seemed to need to talk about Camille, but he never talked about Beatrice, and Juniper wasn't going to push it. When he was ready, she would be here to listen.

They had continued visiting the village over the past several days, and when there was finally a break in the madness and things felt as if they were returning to normal, Bodin mentioned returning to explore another portal, and she'd agreed right away. She wanted to finish their conversation from before the attack and learn how the doors worked, but she also needed to continue what they had started that morning in bed. Feeling Bodin respond to her touch…

She wanted more.

It had been a week, and while they continued sharing a bed, they hadn't done more than kiss since that day. It was frustrating. But between helping

their people and figuring out how the soldiers breached the city, they practically collapsed at the end of each night and woke early each morning to start over again.

And the tension just kept growing.

Bodin led her back to the palace and down to the round cellar room, leaving Richard and Samuel upstairs. “I know I said you could pick the next one, but can I? I think you’ll really love the fifth one.”

He pointed to the door, and she gave an encouraging nod. He seemed lighter, like spending the past week taking care of his people together or sharing about Camille had lifted a bit of the weight from his shoulders, even if there was still a tinge of sadness in his dark gaze. Maybe it was the fact that she’d sent out letters to her father and brother right away that was giving him hope.

Or perhaps, like her, he’d simply enjoyed waking up in each other’s arms as much as she did.

The portal opened to a dark cavern that made her pause. Bodin entwined their fingers and whispered, “Trust me.”

Juniper held his gaze for a long moment and realized she did. She trusted this man. And she was tired of denying it. He may never be able to give her his heart, but she knew they could be happy together. They could still have a wonderful life, a happily ever after like in the fairy tales she read as a child.

But before they could do that, she needed to be honest with him. He’d shared so much with her already. Hells, he’d shown her his magic the day after the wedding, even though he knew her people didn’t accept it. Surely that meant he at least wanted to trust her too.

Which meant that it was her turn to share her past. He needed to know why she’d been locked away for so long. That was what she’d started to tell him that morning. And honestly, that was why she hadn’t pushed for things to continue this past week. She needed to tell him the truth, but she couldn’t figure out how. Each time she considered starting that conversation, she found herself seeking another task to help give her a bit more time.

Juniper had been here nearly a month though, and she trusted Bodin. She knew he cared about her to some degree and desired her. So, it was no longer a matter of *needing* to tell him. She *wanted* to.

Her throat tightened from fear and the other emotions that were building up. She didn’t know how she had made it to this life with him, but she

thanked the goddess again.

A warm, subtle breeze brushed the back of her neck, and she smiled. She'd always told herself Ronna was with her, that she was in the wind around them, guiding them to the right path.

"June?"

She loved hearing him call her that. Nodding, she stepped closer. "I trust you."

He leaned down to kiss her once. Not on the cheek or forehead like he'd been prone to do since she arrived—though he still did that often. But most of the time, his soft lips now pressed to hers without hesitation, his beard tickling her chin.

"I could get used to this," she'd whispered the first morning they woke up together, before slapping a hand over her mouth. "That wasn't supposed to be out loud."

Bodin had let out a low chuckle, kissed her once more, then said against her mouth, "Me too."

Juniper smiled as he pulled away and led her through the portal. Her breath caught in her lungs. He shut and locked the door, but with the lack of light from the palace, she could see the cavern better. Because it wasn't dark.

It was glowing.

Blue and green algae illuminated their path as they walked farther into the tunnel. When she heard the faint sounds of tinkling water, her steps quickened, and she pulled away from Bodin.

"Bo," she said with a gasp, rounding a bend in the rocky path to find an underground pond with a waterfall in the distance. All the other places had been beautiful so far, and she loved them, but this one might have been her new favorite. It was absolutely captivating with stalactites hanging from the high ceiling. The bioluminescent algae covered one whole side of the cavern, making the water shine bright turquoise.

Bodin came up behind her, taking her hand. "Your brother told me you like water, that you used to go down to the docks when you snuck out." He stopped talking abruptly, eyes wide when she turned toward him with a raised brow.

She'd shared about her times exploring Nortussa, but not about her brother shadowing her.

"I mean…"

“It’s all right.” She resisted rolling her eyes. “I know he followed me at times. Richard always did too.”

Bodin nodded and exhaled slowly. “They just wanted to make sure you were safe.”

“I know,” she whispered, facing the water again. “That’s why Rafe also gave me a dagger and taught me how to protect myself.”

“I’m glad he did.”

“He used to train Hugo and I, having us spar up in my rooms.” She swallowed past the lump in her throat. Remembering how much time they’d spent with her in the beginning hurt. “My mother, despite her obedience and meekness elsewhere, always encouraged it and cheered me on. She wanted me to be more prepared than she had been growing up.” Juniper cleared her throat. “That was a long time ago though.”

After a moment, Bodin said in a soft tone, “Come with me.”

Releasing her hand, he started pulling off his shirt and shoes. When he motioned for her to turn around, she took a deep breath and did as he asked. Her heart pounded in her chest as he tenderly pulled her hair over one shoulder and slowly unlaced her dress.

When it fell to the ground, leaving her in only a shift and her pantalettes, he knelt to remove her shoes. She wanted so badly to reach out and comb her fingers through his inky black hair. Biting her lower lip, she realized she could. This was her husband. She’d touched other parts of him that morning, had kissed him while he laid on top of her.

She raked a hand through his silky locks, releasing it from the strip of leather he used to tie it up. He tilted his head to meet her gaze. As he lifted her ankle to take off her shoe, he let his hand slide up to the back of her knee. Her stomach fluttered uncontrollably. The previously cool caves were now too hot. She was cooking from the inside out.

With a knowing smirk, Bodin straightened again, his fingers following his path to her thigh, her hip, her waist. He stayed on the outside of her shift, but the touch still made it hard to breathe.

“Ready?”

She nodded, and soon, they were both wading into the water in only their underthings.

Bo faced her, walking backward with a smile that only further melted her heart. Her feet left the ground as she began to float, and panic set in. She didn’t know how to swim. But he was there in an instant, wrapping her

in his arms. She rested her palms on his bare chest, and one of his fisted into her shift while pulling her firmly against him.

“This is definitely my new favorite.” Juniper glanced around, taking in the wonder surrounding them. The waterfall rushed down to create a white misty fog where it met the pond, but the rest of the pool was otherwise calm.

“I was hoping you’d like it.” He tilted her chin up and pressed another soft kiss to her mouth. It was nothing like the frenzy last week. Her eyes fluttered shut when he parted her lips, but it remained sweet and slow.

This was what they were fighting for—moments to be with each other like this. And not just for them but for the rest of their kingdom. That was why they needed to find a way to end this war without losing it.

This close, in the glowing light, she could see that his eyes weren’t as black as they usually seemed. There were specks of rich brown, making them feel warmer.

“So fucking beautiful,” he said, cupping one of her cheeks.

She leaned into the touch. Moving her hands higher, she twisted her arms behind his neck. The corner of his mouth twitched, like he could tell just how much she wanted him.

His fingers slid along her jaw and into her hair. And then, his lips were on hers again. Releasing the back of her head, Bodin shifted to palm her thigh. His hand on her skin was almost too much. A soft moan escaped her throat before she could stop it. His tongue licked at the seam of her lips, and she parted them, letting him in. The moment it brushed hers, he wrapped her legs around his waist.

Juniper became abundantly aware of every place their skin touched. It felt as if her entire body was on fire again, seconds away from bursting. She needed to talk to him before this got too far, but with each stroke of his fingers and tongue, the fear retreated further into her mind until she could no longer remember why they needed to slow down and wait.

Without dropping her, Bodin managed to push the hem of her shift up to her waist. Completely pressed against him, there was no hiding his desire. A month ago, the thought of him holding her like this terrified her. She hadn’t wanted to sleep with a man she didn’t know, let alone one people called cruel and vicious.

But now, she knew that wasn’t the case. He was far from being a monster. She’d seen that he could be intense and powerful, but he’d never

used that against her. He had never treated her with anything but kindness.

Letting her instincts guide her, Juniper ground her core against the bulge growing harder beneath her. He sucked in a breath, breaking their kiss. Leaning away, he looked at her, and she saw it. She knew that his traumatic past made him want to keep her out, but he was failing just as much as she was.

"More," she said, afraid to voice her full request.

Bodin held her gaze for a moment before nodding. He didn't lower her though, instead carrying her out of the water and back to dry land. As he did, she hugged him close and kissed the side of his neck, continuing to rock her hips against his. She needed to feel him, to feel that friction that would alleviate the tension building inside her.

He knelt and placed her on their pile of clothes. Never letting her go, he hovered over her as she lay down. His hand skimmed along her side and then her hip to pull her leg up around him farther. All the while, he continued kissing her. Mesmerizing her. Taking her breath away.

No one had ever touched her like this. He settled between her legs, and she welcomed his weight, the pressure of his body against hers. As his lips moved to her jaw and then her throat, Juniper tilted her head to the side. One of his hands trailed from her hip to her breast and gently squeezed through the thin, wet fabric. She let out a gasp, and he raised up enough to meet her gaze.

"June," he whispered, glancing down.

She followed his line of vision and noticed her shift had become translucent from the water, giving him a clear view of her body. When he lifted his dark eyes, she saw the same longing and desire that consumed her. The sensations rushing through her were overwhelming, but she wanted more, needed him like she'd never known she could need someone. The ache in her lower abdomen screamed for her to move, to continue with this.

Nodding, she said, "Please?"

His mouth brushed hers in a much slower kiss. He squeezed her breast once more before lowering his hand to her hip again. His fingers traced along her bare skin as he deepened the kiss. When he lifted his body from hers, she started to protest, but her words disappeared as his hand moved between them, slipping beneath the hem of her shift and inching toward her center.

He broke the kiss with a grin. Backing up, he kissed her chest through the thin fabric, her stomach, one thigh, then the other. When he paused, sitting on his heels, she bit at her lower lip and waited. She had no idea what to expect. She understood the basics of sex, but everything she had learned told her that it was what a wife had to endure.

What did it say about her that she craved his touch and wanted more?

She turned her head away as her vision blurred with unshed tears.

"Juniper?" Bodin removed his fingers from her inner thigh, taking them out from beneath her shift entirely. "What's wrong? We don't have to do this."

"I want to," she whispered, still not meeting his eyes.

Leaning forward, he swept away the tears rolling down her cheeks. "Sweetheart, it's all right. You don't have to—"

"No, I want to," she said, cutting him off. "That's the problem."

He tilted her face toward him. "Why is that a problem?"

"Because it's not… women aren't supposed to want…"

Bodin visibly tensed, and he sat up again. "You're not supposed to want to be with your husband? Who the fuck told you that?"

She raised up too, forcing him to move away a little and give her space. "I've always been told it's instinctual for a man to want sex and that it's a wife's job to… to serve him. The books say it's painful for a woman and enjoyable for men. But I want you…"

Juniper trailed off as she noticed his anger growing. She started to pull her legs in, preparing to stand and run to the palace because she couldn't bear the way he was staring at her. She was all too aware of how ignorant she was of the world, despite her time sneaking around Nortussa; she didn't need to be reminded of it. Bodin wasn't only more experienced because he was twelve years older than her. It was also because he'd been able to go out and truly live. He'd traveled and fought and married twice.

His hand shot out as she started to get up, hooking around her to make her stop.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I shouldn't have told you that. If it disgusts you that I—"

"Stop," he growled. The sound should have frightened her, but it honestly just made the ache in her core stronger. He gripped her chin, keeping her in place, making sure that she was listening to him. "There is so much wrong with all of that, but let me be perfectly clear."

She swallowed.

“There is nothing wrong with what you are feeling, and it does *not* disgust me.” He huffed out a breath. “Quite the opposite, actually.” Shifting, he hauled her into his lap, letting her feel just how much he desired her too. “Yes, many men want sex, but so do women. It can be enjoyable for anyone if done right.”

“It doesn’t hurt?” She was straddling him at this point, separated by only their wet undergarments.

Bodin lifted a hand to tuck some stray hair behind her ear. “The first time, it might hurt in the beginning because your body isn’t accustomed to such an intrusion, but if the person you’re with is gentle and prepares you, it shouldn’t be too bad. And the pleasure will outweigh any temporary pain.”

Her cheeks heated at his blunt honesty, though she also appreciated it. She opened her mouth then closed it again. So many questions swirled through her head, but she didn’t want to show her ignorance even more. “How?”

It was barely more than a breath. His brow furrowed. “How what?”

Closing her eyes, she asked, “How do you prepare?”

His hand tightened on her waist, but he remained quiet long enough that she gave in and looked at him. The smirk that greeted her eased the tension. It was somehow both irritating and attractive all at once.

She tried to pull away again. “Forget it.”

“No, wait. I’m sorry. I’ve just never had to walk another person through this.” he said. “Um… Well, have you… touched yourself?”

Juniper was going to burst into flames. She was certain of it.

His smile widened. When she didn’t answer, he said, “All right, so, you know what your body likes? What feels good?”

She nodded, having initially discovered that a few years ago out of curiosity.

“Good. Now, imagine me doing that.” He slowly eased her back to lie down again. “Imagine my fingers instead of yours.” The appendages in question drifted across her stomach and lower. “Imagine my tongue instead of fingers.”

Her eyes widened, and she sucked in a breath as he pressed his thumb against her through her shift.

“Do you want that?”

She nodded, unable to find her words.

“Juniper, tell me.” His thumb moved up and down, stealing her thoughts. Then, he stopped, taking his hand away.

She groaned at his absence.

“Tell me what you want,” he said in a firm but gentle tone.

“I want you to touch me. Show me everything.”

Bodin grinned and returned his hand to her center. “As you wish, my queen.”

SEVENTEEN

Bodin

In his distraction of trying to console his sister, Eryx hadn't realized Theran was watching. He'd always watched them in envy, not understanding their close bond. No matter how much she insisted she loved them both equally, Theran knew the truth. She would choose Eryx every time. And so, he made it his mission to destroy them both.

Everyone would fear the God of Light and his people.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Bodin had sworn to himself that he wouldn't touch Juniper except to try to make an heir when she was ready, that he wouldn't fall for her. And yet, he couldn't stop. She'd listened to him talk about his first wife, had gone into the village to help their people without balking, and the way she seemed to see him better than anyone ever had… It destroyed the last defenses he'd built around his heart.

It was honestly concerning how perfect she was, how much he cared about her so quickly. How easy it was to forget that she was never meant to be his when she stared up at him with those big green eyes like she was now, waiting with anticipation.

He knew she was nervous, but he also saw the desire in her gaze that matched his own. When she told him she wanted this, he couldn't refuse her. Not when she was trusting him this much. Not when they'd been interrupted last week and he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her touch since.

Bodin had almost slipped up earlier though when he told her that he'd never walked someone through this before. He almost told her the reason was because with Camille, it had been the first time for both of them. They had learned together. And Beatrice was more experienced when they got married years later.

Juniper might have been understanding most of the time about hearing his past wives' names, but he wasn't foolish enough to mention them in this moment. Regardless of the context, he wanted this time to be just about the two of them.

Nodding more to himself than her, Bodin reached for the short hem of her shift that had taunted him—just as the slits in the dresses she'd worn the past few weeks had. He kept his eyes on her face, watching for any sign that she'd changed her mind and didn't want this as he slowly pushed the fabric up around her waist to expose her undergarments. Juniper bit into her lower lip, and he wanted to lean down and kiss her, tug that lip out with his own teeth.

So, he did. Her smile softened when he pulled away again, as if she understood the realization that they didn't have to hold back anymore. He'd seen the same look when she ran her hand through his hair before.

"May I?" he asked, reaching for her pantalettes.

Juniper swallowed and whispered, "Yes."

He hadn't brought her here for this specific reason. The plan had been to explain how the portals worked, but that could wait. Right now, he just wanted to feel his wife coming undone by his touch.

Bodin took a deep breath and hooked his fingers into the pantalettes. As he tugged the fabric down, not bothering with the ties, he was certain neither of them were breathing any longer. Once she was bare before him, he took a second to appreciate her. She started to move, to squeeze her legs together, but he shook his head and returned his thumb to the apex of her thighs. He rubbed small, gentle circles around it before running his finger up and down her slit.

"Bo," she said with a soft gasp. He loved his name coming out of that beautiful mouth. He wanted to hear her moaning it, screaming it out in pleasure. Lowering to lie between her legs, he replaced his fingers with his tongue, and she sucked in a breath—which was easily becoming his new favorite sound. Then, she spread her thighs a little wider.

Smiling against her, he continued working her up. As her breaths grew more ragged, his tongue found her entrance, tasting her sweetness. She moaned when he pressed into her a little harder.

"Bodin." Her back arched as he returned to licking her clit and slowly pushed a finger into her wetness. She writhed under him, panting and moaning with each pump in and out, deeper and deeper. Her hand went to his head and gripped his hair. The scrape of her fingernails against his scalp sent a shiver through him, making his hard cock twitch. Holding him to her, she said, "Goddess above. I—I can't—Oh fuck."

He chuckled at her foul language. "Let go for me, Juniper," he said against her, not wanting to stop.

Her hips bucked, and he put his free hand on her abdomen to keep her in place as he added a second finger and quickened his movements, sucking on that sensitive bundle of nerves.

"Bo!" She screamed, pulsing around his fingers as she fell over the edge. He slowed down, guiding her through the spasms. Never would he have judged her for being with another person in the past, but a sense of pride bloomed in his heart knowing he'd been the first to touch her this way. The first to hear those incredible sounds and get her to come.

But when he lifted his head to look at her, he froze, fingers still buried inside her, as he took in his exquisite, radiant wife. Because she was more than radiant. She was glowing.

Literally.

At first, he thought it was because of the luminescent cave walls, but this was different. A pale light gleamed from her body.

He withdrew his hand and scrambled back onto his knees, ignoring how hard he was. Her eyes were closed, one palm on her chest as she tried to steady her breathing. Noticing his absence, she opened them and raised up on her elbows. Then, she looked down and her jaw dropped. She bolted upright into a sitting position and crossed her arms, hugging herself.

Shaking her head, she said, "No. No, no, no, no."

"You're—"

"No!" She yanked her undergarments back into place when he stood. "I swear, Bo, that's not—"

His head reeled. "You have Lumen magic."

She pushed to her feet. "Yes, but it's not—"

Everything seemed to click into place. The final pieces of the puzzle, found at last. “This is why after so long of being hidden away, your father waited to push you into my arms,” Bodin said, grabbing his clothes. He furiously wiped his fingers and face with the sleeve of his jacket before yanking his pants and shirt on.

“It’s why I was hidden away, yes.” Juniper’s voice wavered. “But it has nothing to do with—”

“Do you honestly expect me to believe you weren’t sent in as a spy? Are you even really the princess?”

Tears rimmed her eyes. The glow to her skin was gone now, leaving only a flush from their previous activities. “Of course I’m the princess.”

Memories assaulted him from the past. His brother playing with a little girl, the daughter of a maid who came with the royal family fifteen years ago. Bodin had watched them showing each other their magic—Elias playing with his shadows and the girl swiping through them with glowing white hands. Their laughter echoing through the air.

“It was you,” he whispered. She’d told him that very first day that she’d stayed with a maid to conceal her true identity. Was that why?

“What?”

Throwing the soiled jacket aside, he clenched his fists. He’d return for it later. “So, your father is working with Gilarn? This alliance is a lie. That’s why he wasn’t willing to send more troops to aid us. After all this time, he finally chose a side, and he picked them?”

“No,” she whispered, tears rolling down her cheeks. “Please stop.”

“Or what? You’ll use it against me?” A twinge of guilt flashed through him, but he refused to acknowledge it. Especially when his kingdom was in danger.

“I don’t know how to use it. And you know as well as I do that light magic cannot do harm.” Her tone hardened, and she raised her chin. Brushing away the dampness from her face, she started putting her dress back on. “Regardless, I don’t know how to control it or where it comes from.”

“It comes from Gilarn!” He hadn’t even realized he’d moved closer until she took a step away. The fear in her glare made him halt. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. He would not lose his temper because of this. Because somehow, his enemy had slipped into his home.

And into his heart.

He took a few more deep, steadying breaths to calm the darkness swirling within.

"Bo, please," Juniper said, lifting a hand in front of her. "I am not a spy, nor am I from Gilarn."

"Why in the hells should I believe you?"

"Because I'm your wife," she snapped right back at him. "Because I went down into the village and helped you care for your—*our*—people. Because you saw me write letters to my father and brother begging him to send more soldiers to the front lines and surrounding areas."

Bodin took a step away, then another. He knew her points were valid, and yet… "Your skin was glowing, June. Lumen magic only comes from Gilarn."

Another thought hit him, nearly making him fall to his knees.

His father started this war because it was a Gilarnian assassin who killed Elias. He'd questioned the man until the killer admitted that he'd been sent by the royal family from the north, but what if… What if it had been Juniper's father?

"Which is why my parents hid me," she continued, oblivious to his inner revelations. "They feared for my life because that is what everyone believes." She scoffed. "Because it's not remotely possible that an ancestor came from there and passed it down?"

He crossed his arms. "For it to be that strong, it has to come directly from a parent or grandparent. If you had any sort of real education, you would know that."

Juniper reared as if he'd slapped her. Mirroring his stance, she crossed her own arms and walked closer, her anger clearly overcoming her fear. "You know what the best part of being locked away for fifteen years was? I had all the time in the world to *read*. I have read thousands of books, *Your Majesty*, so don't you dare tell me I'm uneducated."

Leaning in, he said, "Thousands of books, and yet you know nothing of sex? You thought your desire was something to be ashamed of and that women hated being with their husbands, so forgive me if I don't trust that you know much of how the real world works."

She opened her mouth, as if to argue, but he wasn't done.

"You have all this knowledge, but you don't even know that *you* are why this godsdamned war restarted." He tugged her around to lace up her dress. It wasn't done well, but it would get her back to her room without

causing more of a scene. Despite being furious, he couldn't do that to her. "Or did you think it was a coincidence that you were locked up right after my brother was murdered? Right before my father declared war?"

Juniper ripped away and whirled to face him. "What are you talking about? I was six years old; how could I have had anything to do with—"

"Your family came here so that our fathers could sign a betrothal agreement."

Her eyes widened. With a hand on her chest, she took a step back. "We were always supposed to get married?"

Bodin let out an unamused laugh. "No, Juniper. You were supposed to marry Elias." He stepped closer. "My brother was so excited to meet you, so when we were told you didn't come, he was devastated. He ran off and went to hide, but then, he met a little girl, the daughter of a maid."

She shook her head, eyes welling with tears.

A part of him knew he was being unfair, but he couldn't stop. He'd held this in for too long. "He met a little girl with Lumen magic, and they became friends."

"Stop," Juniper whispered.

"For days, they played and laughed together, sharing their different forms of magic. But then, a couple of days before the Forossan envoy was to depart, Elias was killed." *By a poisoned dagger meant for me.* "And he never would have been in that situation if he hadn't been sneaking around with his new friend, escaping from his guards."

Juniper looked on the verge of fainting. "But—"

"No. I'm done." He turned on his heel and headed toward the portal door. "Laurent will be waiting to escort you to our rooms when you're ready to leave," he said over his shoulder.

Quickening his pace, he rushed away from his wife before she could respond. He didn't know what to think or believe about her magic or the connection to Gilarn. Once he reached the round room of doors, he didn't stop. He raced up the stairs, only to come face to face with Juniper's head guard.

The man who should have been there to save Elias.

"Your Majesty, is everything all right?" Richard looked him up and down before glancing behind Bodin. "Where is Ju—Queen Juniper?"

He gathered his composure as best as he could. Samuel stood nearby, so he quietly said to Richard, "She's in the fifth portal. Please wait for her to

be finished. I have business to attend to."

The man nodded but seemed wary. "Is something wrong, sire?"

"Not at all." Bodin didn't wait for him to ask more. He stepped around Richard and motioned for Samuel to come with him as he made his way to the corridor that led to the main foyer of the palace. "Do you know where Laurent is?"

"I think he was meeting with a lord from one of the mountain villages in a council chamber to talk about rebuilding. They're still struggling after a similar attack."

Bodin sighed. "Has the prisoner spoken?"

When Samuel hesitated, Bodin paused his trek. His guard nodded. "You were right. He wasn't a soldier. They were part of Umbra."

"They weren't from Gilarn," the king said with a groan and took off once more. He had suspected the truth after Juniper asked him about the attack one night. She'd questioned why so few soldiers would try to take down their biggest city. And he admitted he'd been thinking the same. But to hear it confirmed…

Bodin wasn't sure he had it in him to handle his wife's betrayal, a possible enemy on another front, *and* a group of rebels trying to cause strife in their own kingdom. Not by himself, at least.

He found Laurent sitting at the long wooden table at the center of the second checked room with a few other men and women. His friend looked up when they entered. Bodin tried to hide his emotions, but his friend appeared to see through the shield as usual. Laurent stood and excused himself. Keeping calm, he approached Bodin and directed him into the hall.

Bodin waved Samuel away, needing privacy.

"What's wrong?" Laurent asked the moment they were mostly alone.

"She's Gilarnian." Bodin leaned against the nearest wall.

"What?" His brow furrowed.

Running a hand through his hair, Bodin realized he hadn't tied it up again. It probably looked like a mess from her fingers tangling in it. "I need you to go get Juniper from the portals and escort her to our rooms. Without causing a scene, put more guards at the doors to—"

"*Juni* is Gilarnian?" he hissed. "What the fuck? How is that even possible?"

"I don't know." Bodin sighed and tilted his head toward the arched ceiling high above them. "Please just… just make sure she gets to our

rooms and doesn't leave. I need to talk to her, but I can't right now."

Laurent put a hand on his arm. "I'll take care of it."

"Thank you," Bodin whispered as his friend walked away. Inhaling deeply, he straightened and strode in the opposite direction. He needed space and time to think about everything, to figure out how to deal with this and learn the truth. He made it to his study and shut the door behind him before sliding to the floor.

He couldn't do this again. His heart was shattering in his chest, threatening to stop his lungs entirely. Burying his head in his hands, he cursed himself for opening up and letting Juniper in.

How could he have been so foolish?

Had he been so blind?

No. He knew deep down that she hadn't given any reason for him to doubt her or suspect anything before now.

He'd wanted to keep her away, but he couldn't. And now, he was stuck in this mess.

Yet, she seemed so genuine. Could she be that good of an actress?

With a long breath in, he began going through what she'd said, the hurt in her eyes. She'd been crying, but was it because of him or because she'd been caught? He desperately wanted to be wrong, to see the truth in her words.

But everything he'd told her had been real. He remembered her. She was connected to all of this. He just needed to figure out how and find out what his father knew.

Perhaps that was what gave him the strength to calm down and push to his feet. He had to read through the treaty again to see if this could be used against him, and he had to get his father's personal journals. It was a tradition passed down through his family to keep them and read about their predecessor's life and choices. However, Bodin had never read his father's. The sudden loss of his parents and second wife had been too devastating, leaving him feeling hollow save for the grief and survivor's guilt.

Bodin physically made it through that nightmare with only the scars down his face, but he lost so much more.

And he refused to lose another person.

He would re-read the books on magic to see if it was possible to have a distant relative pass it down, as Juniper had suggested. It wasn't for Noxian

magic, but maybe Lumen was different. Maybe he'd missed something when searching for reasons behind his ability to create portals.

Bodin didn't think so, but he hoped with everything he had that he was wrong. He prayed to the goddess that his wife was telling the truth and that her father hadn't allied with Gilarn then used her to get close to Bodin.

He knew it wasn't really her fault his brother was killed; that blame was on him. But instead of sticking around to help figure out who the assassin worked for, the king fled with his family, claiming he wanted nothing to do with an impending war. The betrothal agreement was burned. That little friend Elias had made disappeared. *Juniper* disappeared.

Now, he understood why.

His father had immediately outlawed Lumen magic. When he declared war, he enforced the new law by prosecution. If Juniper had stayed, she would have been killed.

Bodin slammed a hand onto his large mahogany desk. His heart tore to shreds in his chest because… that law was still in place.

EIGHTEEN

Juniper

To start his quest for dominance and revenge, Theran realized his first move would be to take control of the lake once and for all. He demanded ships be built directly on the edge of Lac de Rêves. Because of the small opening between the mountains that led to the enchanted waters, only a small crew could work on them. One at a time. It took years to finish three and then send troops over in multiple trips.

Years for the God of Light to grow angrier that his sister hadn't chosen him.

When Juniper finally calmed down enough to return to the palace, she was surprised to find Richard waiting for her instead of Laurent. One look of concern had her façade crumbling again. She didn't hesitate to step into his open arms.

"What happened?" he asked, holding her close, his hand going to the back of her head. "Did he hurt you?"

Physically? No. But she didn't want to tell this man who'd always been like a father figure what had led to the king seeing her magic. The magic no one outside of her family knew about. Not even Richard.

Then, what he said after…

Surely, it wasn't true. She would have known if she were previously engaged to a prince.

Shaking her head, she whispered, "No. We… got into an argument. I-it's fine."

"If he touched you—"

“He didn’t,” she said quickly. “Not… not in a harmful way.” Her cheeks heated. She was glad Richard still held her so he couldn’t see her face. “He didn’t hurt me.”

He just thinks I’m something I’m not.

She remembered the little boy with shadow magic though. She’d been sitting in the kitchens, watching the preparation for dinner, when he ran in and asked to hide there. The head chef told him he was more than welcome, and then he came and sat with Juniper and—*Oh burning hells.* She’d been sitting with the chef’s daughter. Nadine.

“Juniper?” a familiar voice said from near the stairs, cutting into her spiraling thoughts.

Sniffling, she released her guard and moved around him. Laurent, Samuel, and another of Bodin’s soldiers stared at them, but only the former looked like he had an idea of what was happening. It didn’t surprise her. Bodin told his friend everything, it seemed. Still, a pang of grief hit her. She didn’t want to lose Laurent’s friendship too.

Not wanting to cause any trouble, she headed toward him before he could speak.

“Wait, what’s going on?” Richard asked, trailing after them up the stairs. It wasn’t his place to question her, but he had never been one to strictly follow protocol where she was concerned.

“We’re escorting Her Majesty to her bedchambers, where she is to wait for the king. He needs to speak to her alone,” Laurent said over his shoulder. They reached the art gallery, and her new friend stepped aside to walk next to her instead. As if he feared she would run off.

To be fair, that was a valid concern, but she had no intention of trying to escape this. She wanted—*needed*—to talk to Bodin. She needed answers about what happened when she was a child. She’d been so little and didn’t remember a lot of it.

And he had to listen to her, hear her out.

Because she was telling the truth.

She wasn’t a spy. She didn’t know where the magic came from. The only thing she knew was that it was the reason she’d been hidden away at six years old. The war had started, and people were divided across the continent. Her light liked to appear at the most inopportune times, she couldn’t control it, so her parents had decided it was best to keep her out of

sight. It was a dangerous ability to possess south of the mountains. To herself. To her family name.

No one could know that she'd inherited magic from Gilarn. Even if they didn't know how.

She was locked away in a lonely tower until her father was desperate enough to pawn her off on another king for money. Apparently, her safety wasn't a concern anymore. She wasn't as important as his wealth.

Unless…

Unless Bodin had been right and there was more going on. If there was though, she didn't know about it.

Laurent led her to her bedroom and opened the door. The guards, including Richard, took up spots in the hallway, but Laurent walked in a few steps and hesitated before leaving. He grabbed her hand to stop her from crossing the room and held her gaze as he lowered his voice. "I don't know *exactly* what is going on, but I hope for everyone's sakes that he's wrong."

"He is," she whispered, pleading with her eyes for him to believe her. "I-I'm not… what he thinks."

The man who'd become her closest friend over the past few weeks waited a beat. With a sigh, he nodded and squeezed her arm gently. "I have to keep these two out here and lock the door, but Richard can stay in the hall too, of course."

"You're leaving?" Terror gripped her chest in a vice. Memories of being left in that tower flooded her.

"To go find Bodin and drag his stubborn ass up here." Laurent reached for her hand, comforting her the slightest bit. "I promise I'll be back soon." He stepped forward, wrapping an arm around her in a hug and whispering, "I'm not leaving you up here for good. I swear."

When he walked away and locked the door behind him, however, her chest tightened even more. Spinning around, she looked at the room. It had started to feel like her safe space, a home unlike anything she'd ever had. She had grown to love sharing this room with her husband, even when they were sleeping in separate beds.

Now, it felt like another prison.

Juniper walked to the far side of the bed nearest the tall open windows and balcony. The fresh air didn't help though. Sliding to the floor with her back to the bed, she hugged her knees to her chest. A hollowness settled

inside her. She'd thought this place was different, that she was finally free, but she was wrong.

She would never be free.

Not with this useless magic coursing through her veins.

The sun started its descent in the sky, making her realize just how long she and Bodin had been in the portal lands. Where she let him touch her. She couldn't bring herself to regret it. In those moments, she caught a glimpse of what their lives might have been. What it might have felt like to be loved and cherished. That was all she'd ever wanted. And now, she may never experience it again.

She didn't know what Bodin would do with her. According to the law, he could have her killed. His enemies' magic flowed through her, and if he wouldn't listen to her, if he didn't care that she didn't know where it came from, her life was forfeit. One way or another, she knew it was over. If he didn't kill her, he would lock her up.

Juniper almost preferred the former. At least then, she could be free among the stars.

Bodin blamed her for his brother's death. In another life, her parents had planned for her to marry the younger prince. New tears filled her eyes. They fell as she silently cried and waited to face her fate. She'd been so free since arriving. She should have known it was too good to be true, but she'd wanted so badly to believe this was her fresh start in a new life.

It was dark by the time the door unlocked and opened. Juniper didn't move, didn't want to see who'd come to fetch her. Hours had passed since Laurent left, and the only time she got up was to change into dry clothes and relieve herself. Then, she returned to her spot—albeit down a little farther toward the foot of the bed to avoid the wet spot.

No one else had entered, which meant he hadn't succeeded in convincing Bodin to come talk to her. No, whomever was here would be escorting her to a dungeon or to the gallows, of that she had no doubt.

Would Richard be killed or locked away too just for knowing her, protecting her? What about her other guards?

Would Bodin try to attack Forosse? He had to see how horrible of an idea that was; he couldn't face war on two fronts.

Lanterns flared to life around the space, but Juniper still didn't move. She stared at the twinkling stars high above the mountains in the distance.

When footsteps neared, she realized it only sounded like one person. Turning her head, she stared up at her husband in shock and confusion.

Bodin seemed to hesitate, taking a deep breath, before lowering next to her. She returned her gaze to the stars.

A dozen heartbeats ticked by, and then, she finally asked, “Are you going to kill me?”

“I should,” he said in a hushed tone. “But no. I… can’t.”

She exhaled.

“I want to believe you, but if you’re not a spy, why didn’t you tell me about the magic?”

Angling toward him, she whispered, “Because I’ve been locked away my whole life to hide it. And it’s forbidden here.”

His lips parted, and he glanced around the room. “And I did the same thing. I’m sorry.”

The last words were barely audible. She shook her head, her anger warring with heartbreak. Instead of addressing him, she continued to explain. “We don’t know why I have it, and it has no real use. I just…”

“Glow.”

Juniper nodded and turned away. “I’ve been told since I was a child that people would try to kill me if they found out, and that was in Forosse. We weren’t even at war with Gilarn, but it’s still forbidden. And my people don’t hate them nearly as much as you do here.”

Bodin sighed. Then, to her surprise, he reached for her hand.

When she jerked her arm away, he said, “June, please look at me.”

Chewing on her lower lip, she reluctantly turned. The traitorous tears had returned at the use of her nickname. She hated them, hated the idea that they made her look weak or scared, hated that something so simple coming from him could affect her so much.

“June,” he whispered, cupping her cheek.

This time, she didn’t fight his touch. “You didn’t even give me a chance before you started accusing me.”

“I know—”

“No.” Juniper jumped to her feet and put space between them. “You don’t. That’s just it.”

Bodin stood but didn’t try to move closer.

“I am your wife,” she started, “and from day one, you have made sure I have felt safe, comfortable, and free. You yelled at my brother for speaking

to me disrespectfully and made a point to show everyone I am an equal as your queen, not an ornament to sit behind you." She marched toward him. "I have been open and honest with you about *everything* but this one aspect of my life—"

"It's a pretty big fucking aspect, June," he shouted, throwing his arms out at his sides. "I'm sorry for reacting when the woman I'm falling in love with *accidentally* revealed she has magic from the kingdom I'm at war with!"

Juniper stilled, her mouth hanging open. The rest of her argument died on her tongue. Bodin's chest heaved with breath, and they'd moved so close she could once again see that deep brown color in his wide eyes. His own jaw slammed shut, and he leaned back, as if just realizing what he admitted out loud.

"I didn't tell you because it is forbidden here," she said in a calmer tone, letting him move on. "I don't know where it comes from. No one else in my family has it, as far as I know." When he started to speak, she added, "And I'm aware that doesn't make sense because it's supposed to be inherited. But it's the truth."

She'd read every book she could find on the subject in search of answers, but nothing mentioned this sort of situation.

Crossing her arms, she said, "I didn't tell you, Bodin, because I needed out of that tower. I needed this marriage to work, and I knew you would have turned it down if you knew before or you would have thrown me in a cell to die if you found out after. When you made it clear that this wouldn't be a marriage of love, I thought I'd be able to hide it and it wouldn't matter. It's not like I can control it or use it. I just know is that it's tied to my emotions."

She moved to sit on the edge of the bed.

Bodin stepped closer, leaning one hip against the mattress. "What do you mean?"

"When I was little, I was able to call it forward, but when I started to fear it and tried to hide it, I lost any bit of control I once had. Now, I just… glow when feeling anything intensely, especially good things."

"Like being touched by another person for the first time."

Juniper nodded, though it wasn't a question. "I didn't expect… whatever this is between us. I thought you would keep your distance and then it wouldn't be an issue. But then, we started growing closer, and I

knew I wouldn't be able to keep it from you forever." Lowering her voice, she said, "I'm happy here with you, and I knew it would come out when we started trying for an heir, even if you didn't feel the same… because I'm falling too."

He visibly swallowed. "This is what you've been trying to talk to me about?"

"Yes. I was going to tell you the truth."

Bodin was quiet for a long moment.

She uncrossed her arms only to wring her fingers together while waiting for his next words. One way or another, they would change her life. Either he accepted her as no one ever had, or… or he disposed of her and found his next wife. Her heart raced in her chest, threatening to burst out of her skin. He could keep her locked away too, but she wouldn't let that happen. Never again would she live out her days confined to her bed chambers.

No one would ever hold her prisoner again.

"I went through my books all day, searching for information on how it's inherited. Every account claims the same thing."

"To be that powerful, it has to come from a parent," she whispered, knowing the same information he did. "No one else in my family has magic though, I swear."

"I want to believe you—"

"Then, do," she snapped. "I have trusted you every step of the way in this marriage. I slept in your bed, I went through your portals, I helped your people." Groaning, she pushed off of the bed and started pacing. "I barely blinked a fucking eye when you told me about *your* magic."

"That's different."

"How?" She whirled to face him, hands flying out as her voice rose. "You have strange magic that's different from everyone else in this goddessforsaken kingdom, and you don't know where it came from. Why is this any different?"

His eyebrows sat high on his forehead, and she realized that she had started yelling at the end of her rant. Biting her lower lip, she shook her head in anger and worry. If anyone talked to her father like that, they were thrown in a cell or brought to the noose. Bodin hadn't seemed like the type of man to do that, but the fear lingered in the back of her mind. Especially after so many accusations, after the way he'd treated her earlier.

Slowly, he stepped closer. Juniper braced herself, determined not to cower or run. She would face this, face him. Except, he didn't shout or even appear angry.

Bodin used his thumb to pull her lip out from between her teeth then brushed the finger along it. His eyes focused on that one spot for what felt like a lifetime before he leaned in and pressed the softest kiss to the corner of her mouth.

"You're right. I'm sorry," he whispered, followed by three little words that brought on a new wave of tears. "I believe you."

"You…" Juniper couldn't even finish a sentence. Her words caught in her throat. She stared at him in disbelief.

"I believe you, June," he said, tucking back a piece of hair behind her ear. "You're right. You've trusted me, and now it's my turn. I should have listened."

"You accused me of—"

"I know." Bodin shook his head. "That was just… fear and grief exploding from me. I'm sorry."

She hesitated only a minute before giving in to the overwhelming and exhausting emotions—relief, love, sadness, joy—crashing through her. Juniper wrapped her arms around him, burying her face against the side of his neck as she sobbed. Bodin didn't hesitate to return the embrace. He hauled her up against him, bringing her legs to either side of his hips. Her arms crossed behind his neck as he hugged her.

In that moment, as her husband held her close, kissing her temple, she realized she had really never experienced this sort of acceptance before. Juniper had never felt so relieved, so free. It was one thing to be able to go and do whatever she wanted, but this… This was something else entirely.

That familiar warmth brushed across her arms, giving her a sense of comfort. It reassured her that she was where she was meant to be. She'd been hurt in a way she hadn't imagined he would ever have the power to do, but with his belief in her, the pain faded to the background.

This might have started off as an arranged marriage neither of them wanted, but she was already well on her way to falling deeply in love with Bodin. And by the sounds of it, he felt the same.

As he turned and moved toward the bed, she knew she would let him take as much time as he needed. It would be worth it in the end.

NINETEEN

Bodin

Theran ordered every able-bodied person over the age of twelve to Valétoi. With numbers on their side and the ability to heal with their light magic, they became a nearly invincible foe. But it didn't stop there. It wasn't enough for the god.

It was never enough.

Sitting on the edge of the mattress with his wife on his lap, Bodin wondered if he was being naïve and too trusting. He knew it was foolish to simply take her word. Yet, he found himself doing just that. She was right; she hadn't balked at his magic, nor had she been afraid of him. For that, he wanted to give her a chance.

Maybe he wanted it to be the truth for bigger reasons. With his arms wrapped fully around her waist, her nuzzling his neck, he couldn't help but feel like this was right where he belonged. He needed her to be telling the truth because the alternative was too painful.

Bodin kissed the side of her head.

"Promise me," he said against her messy hair. She had changed into a new dress, but her wavy locks had dried in a tangled nest.

Juniper leaned back and held his gaze without faltering, the remnants of her tears lingering on her cheeks. "I swear to you I'm not a spy. I don't know where the magic comes from or why I have it."

He didn't move for the longest time, and she didn't push him. They simply stared at each other, sitting together. They still needed to have

another discussion though. One that would hurt just as much.

"I'm sorry for accusing you of…" He swallowed, wiping away what remained of the hurt he'd caused her. "You weren't the reason Elias was killed."

She placed her hands on his chest, and he wondered if she could feel his pounding heart. "But it was partially my fault he was out there without his guards."

Bodin shook his head, guilt coursing through him. He never should have put this on her. "You were a child—you *both* were. And he loved hiding from them long before he met you." Inhaling to steady himself, he whispered, "Which is all the more reason you don't belong with me. You were meant to be with him, and I—"

"Bodin," Juniper said, cutting him off, sadness filling her green eyes. "I didn't know about the arrangement. I was six years old; I barely even remember that visit. And I didn't know that the friend I'd made was the prince, just like he didn't know I was a princess. We were far too young to feel anything beyond friendship, which only lasted a few days."

Bodin opened his mouth then shut it, unsure what to say.

"I didn't belong to him, but do you know what this *does* tell me?"

"What?" he breathed.

She smiled and trailed a finger along his scars, as if by habit—scars that had never seemed to bother her. "I was always meant to come here. To meet *you*."

"You would have been my sister-in-law," he couldn't help but say, a little of the tension leaving his body.

"Why must you ruin the moment?" she deadpanned.

Her mouth twitched, and he could see how hard she was fighting a laugh. Shaking his head, he swept a hand into her hair and tugged her closer. Bodin kissed her hard, letting her see and feel the way he needed her. Her lips parted, and she moaned as his tongue stroked hers.

Gripping her tightly, he stood and turned to lay her down instead. He wasted no time climbing up over her. She lifted her knees around his hips, and he lowered his weight onto her a little more as he explored her curves with one hand, thanking whoever had decided to design dresses in this kingdom with these deliciously high slits. His fingers slipped under the fabric at her thigh, brushing her soft skin.

“Bo,” she said with a gasp as he rolled his hips against hers, his hardness evident.

He kissed his way down her jaw and to her exposed collarbone.

And then, her stomach growled, breaking the silence and tension.

Juniper started giggling. She squeezed her lips together, as if trying to hide it, but the harder she tried, the worse it got. Until they were both laughing and he was pushing himself up.

“No!” Juniper grabbed on to his shirt before he could climb off the bed. “I don’t want to stop.”

“You need to eat, Sunshine. You’ve been locked in here most of the day.” More guilt flooded him. He was just as bad as her parents. The people who’d kept her trapped most of her life.

She sat up. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. “Sunshine?”

Shrugging, he said, “You glow like the sun.”

The corner of her lips twitched. “I like that.”

He cupped her cheek, making sure she was looking him in the eyes, needing her to really hear him. “I’m sorry, June. For locking you in here without listening.”

“I… I should have told you. You trusted me with your secret. I wanted to tell you, but I was so scared.”

“I know.” Leaning in, he pressed another kiss to her mouth. “I’m sorry for reacting so strongly. It’s just been painful, having those memories brought back so forcefully. My brother meant the world to me, and I should have been there to protect him.”

Juniper shifted to her knees, bringing their bodies closer. “Richard was there. He was always with me, so he had to have been there, and he couldn’t stop it. There was nothing you could have done, Bodin. This isn’t your burden to bear.”

“It is though,” he whispered. “The assassin was here for me.”

“That still doesn’t make it your fault.” She pulled him fully into her arms. “Do you think Elias would want you to hold on to this guilt?”

Bodin couldn’t speak, but he shook his head. No, his brother would hate that. So would his parents. But how did he just let it go after fifteen years?

Juniper leaned up to kiss him once, twice. “I remember being rushed away from here,” she said in a soft tone. “My father insisted I hide because of the laws put in place after your father declared war on Gilarn. He’s not a good man, but I do think he was genuinely doing it to protect me.”

“He was.” At least he could reassure her in this. “I found a journal of my father’s… he knew about your magic. That was why they wanted to arrange the marriage. They wondered if your children would possess both Lumen and Noxian powers.”

Her eyes rounded, her jaw dropping. “I hadn’t thought of that. Do you think ours will?”

“I don’t know.”

That she was so confident about having children with him warmed his heart. Starting a family with this sweet-but-sassy woman would make him so happy, happier than he could even imagine. He’d always wanted to be a father, and he had no doubt she would be an excellent mother. Yet, the mere thought of her giving birth terrified him. Her stomach rumbled again, and he glanced down.

“Let’s get some food in you,” he said.

She frowned, and the pout was so adorable that he pulled her closer, kissing those plush red lips. It was strange to realize how comfortable they were with each other when they met just under a month ago. He felt like he’d known Juniper all his life. And he desperately wanted to get to know her more.

He wanted to get very familiar with every inch of her.

But he wanted more than that; he wanted a life with her, and he didn’t think he could fight it any longer. Climbing out of the bed, he turned back to kiss her once more. “Don’t move.”

Bodin rushed to the door and cracked it open to search for a page. Instead, he was met with Richard’s fury and concern.

“*What* is going on?” the man hissed, evidently over being patient and formal. He tried to see past Bodin, but the king blocked his path. That was when Bodin noticed Laurent and Samuel waiting as well.

“Did you tell her yet?” Laurent asked.

“No. Can you send for food though? She hasn’t eaten since this morning.”

Her head guard looked about ready to fight. “I want to see her.”

Internally sighing, Bodin stepped back and opened the door wider. “June, would you please tell them everything is fine?”

She scrambled upright, having laid down again, and nodded as the two men entered the room. Even Samuel moved to stand in the doorway—at

least he had some semblance of propriety and etiquette. She smiled and said, “It’s all right. We’re fine.”

Richard eyed him, but Laurent appeared relieved as he said, “So, you’re not—”

“No,” Bodin and Juniper said at the same time.

Of course, that didn’t seem to appease Richard. “You’re not what? Juniper, please tell me what is—”

“That’s enough.” Bodin angled himself between the man and the bed, preventing him from moving farther into the room. Trying to keep his tone calm, he said, “I appreciate that you care about my wife and want to protect her, but she doesn’t need to share details of our marriage with you. You’ve already crossed the line, by questioning us and inserting yourself into our business; please don’t push it further. We are fine and happy together. We’ve moved past what happened earlier. That’s all you need to know. If June wants to tell you more later, that’s her prerogative, but right now, we need privacy.”

A muscle in the guard’s jaw twitched. Juniper nodded in agreement. “I’m fine, Richard. I promise. It was a… misunderstanding. Just an argument, but we’re fine now.”

Richard hesitated one more moment before giving a short bow and retreating to the hallway with Samuel, clearly not satisfied and unhappy about it. It was obvious the man truly cared for Juniper, but he also had a place, and right now, he had to be reminded of that. Laurent made to follow, but Bodin grabbed his arm.

“Please have food and wine brought up.” Lowering his voice, he added, “And tell Nadine not to return tonight.”

When Laurent smirked, Bodin smacked the back of his head.

“Stop.”

“I didn’t say anything.” Laurent turned to walk backward out the door. “But it’s about damn time.”

“Just go,” Bodin said with a chuckle before shutting the door on his friend. He opened it again quickly. “And make sure they knock before bringing in the food.”

When he turned to head to the bed, Juniper was frowning with her arms crossed.

“What?” He moved toward her.

“You didn’t need to talk to Richard like that.”

Bodin joined her, sitting against the headboard. “He’s a guard. He doesn’t need to know what’s going on between us.”

“He’s more than just a guard, and you know it.” She pivoted on the mattress to face him. “He’s been by my side since I was a child.”

“Does he know about your magic?”

Juniper sighed and shook her head.

“Then, don’t get mad at me for not telling him about our private conversation.” He put a hand over hers.

“I’m not mad at you. And I’m pretty sure Richard isn’t upset about not knowing about our conversation so much as he is about the fact that he held me while I cried earlier, and he knows you had something to do with it. Regardless, you told Laurent, so—”

“I didn’t tell him about your magic,” he said, cutting her off. When her forehead creased, he scooted closer, guided her to sit next to him, and wrapped an arm around her shoulders so he could pull her against him. “I told him you were Gilarnian when I initially took off, and I told him not only because I trust him but also because I needed him to understand why I asked him to escort you here. He’s my best friend, but if you think he would have locked you up without *any* reason, even with me ordering him to, you’re mistaken. He cares about you too.”

She curled up against Bodin. Before she could say anything though, he continued. It was important she heard this.

“If you want to tell him or Richard about your power, that’s your choice.” He kissed the top of her head. “But I wasn’t going to let either of them pressure you into telling them right now.” When she stayed quiet, he added, “I don’t mean to overstep. I just—”

“Thank you,” she whispered. “Bodin, I… I’ve never… had a choice.”

His heart ached for her. She’d been trapped in more ways than one most of her life. Squeezing her tightly, he said, “You always have a choice now. This is your life. No one is going to tell you what to do ever again.”

She leaned away to meet his gaze, but the mischievous look in her eyes wasn’t what he expected. “Ever? I find that very difficult to believe. My husband seems a bit bossy and controlling.”

Bodin knew she meant it in jest, yet the words struck hard. Lifting a hand to the side of her face, he said, “If I tell you what to do, it’s because I’m trying to protect you. And even then, it’s still your choice.”

He regretted the words immediately. There was still a conversation they needed to have tonight about the news he'd received earlier, and he didn't doubt she would throw this back in his face. He wasn't ready for that argument though. So, instead, he focused on anything else.

"Forgive me for not hearing you out?" he asked. "For locking you in here?"

"Yes, Bo." She nodded, her gaze turning soft. "But promise me that going forward, we will listen to each other, trust each other fully."

Bodin swallowed. "Are there any other big secrets you're hiding that I should know?"

He had one more he hadn't told her, but he couldn't. If he didn't have to, he never would. For both their safety and peace, it was better this way. He wasn't ready to talk about the days when he lost Beatrice and his parents all at once.

Juniper pursed her lips to the side, as if considering. When she started smiling and blushing, he had an idea of what she was about to say, but it still surprised him when she actually did.

"The only one I can think of," she shifted to her knees and moved to straddle his lap, "is that I *really* want to continue what we started earlier."

He slid his fingers into her hair to pull her into a deep kiss. "That's not a secret, Sunshine."

She twisted her arms around his neck, and the feel of her against him was better than he ever imagined anything could be. He parted her lips with his tongue. The soft moan she let out when he used his free hand to slide along her hip to her backside was enough to send his blood rushing lower. Gods above, he wanted her so much.

But someone would be walking in any minute.

"We need to slow down," he said, breaking the kiss. "I promise we'll continue after you eat though. I don't want you passing out on me."

She rolled her eyes but agreed. Leaning forward, she lowered her arms and rested against his chest, laying her head on his shoulder. "Fine. Then, tell me about the portals. You were going to explain how they worked before…"

Bodin traced a hand up and down her spine as he tried to think of how to tell her. It was a confusing concept to speak about out loud. In the end, he figured simply blurting out the truth would be the easiest start. "They're not real."

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the portals and lands beyond aren’t real. It’s… complicated.” He hadn’t tried to explain this in so long. The last time, it had been to Nadine, and he’d fumbled through it then too. He was fairly certain she still didn’t understand it entirely. She’d joked that she didn’t care how it was possible, just that it was and that he’d gifted her the capybara. “It all comes from my mind. Each place is inspired by somewhere I’ve been or my imagination—usually a combination.”

Juniper straightened to see him. “I don’t understand.”

“The meadow, for example, is a real meadow I’ve been to, but when you go through the magic door, it isn’t the same one,” he said. “It’s a replica, an echo of the true place. That’s why there aren’t any people and why most are stuck at the same time of day.”

“So… they’re an illusion?”

“Kind of. It’s a little more elaborate than that, but essentially, yes. That’s why we can’t use one of the doors for you to visit the real Nortussa. I could create it, but your brothers wouldn’t be there.”

She shook her head slowly, but her gaze was distant. “It seems so real.”

A knock sounded on the door, and he helped her off of his lap. As he got out of bed again, needing to adjust himself before heading to the door, he said, “They’re real. You’re just not actually traveling to a new location. I told you it was complicated.”

He went to let a maid in but found Laurent instead. “What are—”

“I brought food.” He held up a tray and walked past Bodin to put it on the round table near the windows. Juniper was already on her feet and heading toward it. Something was wrong though. When his friend simply delivered the food without a flirty comment or attempt at riling up his wife, Bodin knew he’d sensed correctly. Laurent turned to face him. Lowering his voice as he approached, he said, “It’s worse than we thought. Have you told—”

“Not yet.”

“We need to go tomorrow morning,” he whispered. “Unless you want to stay here and just send me.” He said it like he hoped Bodin would agree.

But there was no way in burning hells he would send his best friend into that sort of mayhem alone.

Laurent must have seen the answer in his eyes because he sighed and said, “Didn’t think so, but I thought I’d try.” He glanced at Juniper, who sat

eating a piece of bread. “Spend this time together. Give her at least one night.”

In case we don’t make it back home. The silent words hung between them. Bodin’s stomach churned as he nodded. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Patting him on the shoulder, Laurent left.

“What’s wrong?” Juniper asked as Bodin ambled her way. She grabbed a piece of chicken to put on a plate and started nibbling at it. “He’s acting weird.”

Bending down, he kissed her temple before sitting beside her. “We need to talk, June.”

TWENTY

Juniper

Theran made a plan in secret. He continued sending forces toward the capital of Mesairla, wanting to destroy everything Eryx had built. And then, he went for the ultimate blow. He went after Ronna.

With each word out of her husband's mouth, Juniper grew more and more nauseated.

"You're going to the valley? To the front lines? I-I don't…" She pushed to her feet, no longer hungry. "No."

"I have to." Bodin stood too. "Even with your father's help, we've lost too many men that. The commanders are meeting to strategize. I need to go help however I can."

She shook her head furiously. "No. You're the king; y-you can't go into danger like that. Especially not without an…" Her words trailed off, and she glanced at the bed. Where he promised they would continue after she ate.

Tears rimmed her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she walked toward the bed.

"June?"

"We need to do this." She traced a finger over the pale green blankets. Reminding herself that this was what she wanted anyway, she faced him.

He tilted his head to the side, his eyes full of sorrow. This was their duty —*her* duty—she knew that. She'd hoped for more, especially with their

growing friendship, but now… now it felt like they were only doing this in hopes of creating an heir.

Ignoring the pit in her stomach, she nodded to herself and turned back around. “Will you undo my laces?”

“Juniper—”

“Please don’t,” she said, closing her eyes. “I know what this is and what is expected of me. I always knew this would need to happen, and you’ve been gracious giving me time, but we’re out of that now.”

She hadn’t heard his footsteps, but she suddenly felt his presence behind her. His breath stirred her hair. Yet, he didn’t start to remove her dress.

“Do you trust me?” His hands went to her hips.

“Yes,” she breathed.

His grip tightened on her waist. “Then, trust me when I promise you that I’ll make it home. When I swear that making an heir isn’t the only reason I want you on that bed gasping my name.”

Her jaw dropped in surprise at the crass words. Even so, they set a fire low in her belly. She didn’t fight it when he pulled her around to face him once more. Finally opening her eyes, she met his gaze. He brushed her cheeks with a thumb. She hadn’t realized she was crying.

“You can’t promise you’ll make it back,” she said. “It’s too dangerous.”

“I have shadow magic. I can do more than create magical worlds.”

She hadn’t thought about that. “What can you do?”

“Protect myself.” He lifted a hand, and black smoke swirled across his skin, circling his fingers and wrist.

Bodin sounded so certain, so confident, that she wanted to believe him. It didn’t ease the terror churning her stomach though. “I don’t want to lose you, not when we just started to…”

“You won’t lose me with this trip.” He leaned in to kiss her cheek. “I’ll return to you.”

Juniper sighed and wrapped him in a hug. “And tonight isn’t about making an heir?”

“I would very much like for that to happen, but it might not tonight. That’s not what this is about anyway,” he said, his hand rubbing soothing circles against her back. “Besides, if you recall, I was ready to go in the cave earlier, and that was long before I received word of the meeting.”

She did remember. She remembered feeling his hardness through their clothes and the way she’d wanted more. It amazed her, this heat that

flooded her. Never did she think she would feel this way about the once-stranger she'd married. "You're right about it probably not happening tonight. The books I read did say that it often takes more than one try."

He smirked. "Oh, Sunshine, we're definitely doing it more than once before I leave."

"But you said you were leaving in the morning."

Lifting a hand to the back of her neck, he whispered, "Yes, I did."

And then, his mouth was on hers, claiming her, tasting her. His tongue swept into her mouth, and she reveled in the connection. As he deepened the kiss, his free hand began tugging at the laces of her dress, and she pulled on his shirt. She wanted to see him. All of him.

Bodin paused and ran to lock the door. She couldn't help but chuckle. He clearly wasn't taking any chance this time. On his way back to her, he ripped his shirt off over his head and tossed it to the floor before spinning her around to work faster on the laces. It felt like a lifetime passed by the time he finished and slowly lowered her sleeves, her bodice, and then the skirt. With the lavender fabric pooled at her feet, she faced him on trembling legs in only her shift and pantalettes, both of which were short enough to show a lot of bare skin. In the anticipation of waiting, her worries returned.

"You are breathtaking, Juniper," he said.

Feeling emboldened, she placed her hands on his chest. She lowered them, feeling the hard muscles along his abdomen. He grabbed both of her wrists before she could reach his pants and lifted them to cross behind his neck. The move made her step forward until she was pressed fully against him. Her heart raced in her chest as he slid his hands down her arms, her sides, her waist. When he didn't stop there, she bit at her lip.

"That kills me, you know." Bodin kissed her, sucking her lip into his mouth. He cupped her backside for a second on his way lower. She realized he was bending his legs when he was suddenly at eye level. There wasn't time to ask questions though. He gripped the backs of her thighs and hauled her into the air as he straightened.

A squeal escaped her, and she tightened her arms behind his head. He guided her legs around him and kissed her again and again. And she realized this might be her new favorite place in the world—in his arms, pressed against his bare torso. She practically melted in his embrace.

He turned and managed to put one knee on the bed while still holding her. Laying her down, he followed, never leaving her touch. His hands explored as they continued kissing, and when she once again felt that hardness, she knew it was time.

"Bo," she whispered as his lips trailed along her neck. "More."

He immediately obeyed and slipped his hand beneath her shift. There was no hesitation this time as he pulled her pantalettes down. They hadn't even hit the floor before his fingers found her center. She felt like she should have been embarrassed, especially when he found wetness waiting for him, but she didn't. This need for him was too strong and unlike anything she'd ever experienced—anything she'd read about too, for that matter.

When Bodin began guiding her shift up, she took a deep breath and lifted enough for him to remove it. As he took in her naked form, her cheeks flushed. He didn't say anything, just stared at her, his eyes wide, so she reached for his pants. That seemed to snap him out of his trance. He stood to take them and his boots off.

He gripped himself and pumped his length while returning to the bed.

"Fuck," she whispered, eying the size. She swallowed past the tightening in her throat.

She'd felt it through his pants when kissing, and she had gripped him that morning when she got him off. But to see it like this without any more barriers between them… She didn't have anything to compare it to other than sketches in anatomy books, but Bodin seemed much larger than those.

Kneeling in front of her, he reached for her hand and guided it to him as he said in an amused tone, "You look terrified."

She took over his movements, trying to hide her shock of how it felt against her palm, smooth and hard at the same time. "How is this supposed to fit inside me?"

"It'll fit," he said with all the confidence in the world.

"Without ripping me in half?" As she continued with his hand around hers to show her what he liked, he used his other fingers to play with her again. It was so difficult to concentrate on what she was doing when he kept pressing circles around the sensitive area at the top of her sex. It nearly took her breath away.

Bodin pulled her hand off of him and shifted on the bed to lean over her, pressing her fully into the pillows. He lifted both of her wrists above her

head and kissed her like their lives depended on it. Which, when she thought about it and the fact that he was leaving in the morning, it very well might… but she refused to focus on that right now and made sure she stayed in the moment, focused. When he started grinding against her, she put her legs around him once more.

Breaking the kiss, he whispered, "Do you trust me?"

He'd asked her this earlier, and she had then too, but now… After their argument and getting everything out in the open, she found her answer to be even truer than before.

"I do." She smiled, realizing those were the same words uttered at their wedding. At the time, she had meant it in a detached sort of way. She had agreed to marry him and was promising herself to him, but now… she was silently vowing so much more. Her heart, her mind, her body. Her life.

He rubbed the tip of his hard cock back and forth through her slickness, all while holding her gaze. "I do too."

Juniper wondered if he was thinking the same thing as her. If they were both using the sentiment as a replacement for another set of three words she was too scared to voice.

Bodin brought his fingers to her lips and whispered, "Open."

She did, and then she closed her mouth around the digits when he told her to get them wet, swirling her tongue across his skin. He pulled them out and lowered them to where he'd touched her before. Rubbing his fingers along her slit, he added to her slickness and slowly pushed one finger in.

"Bodin," she said with a sigh.

He grinned as he eased in and out of her. Her breaths quickened, her body tensing. That tight coil within was seconds from springing free when he stopped.

"*Why*?" Juniper groaned. "I was so close."

Her husband let out a deep laugh that reverberated through her. Then, she saw him gripping his length, coating it in that mixture of wetness. To make it easier, she realized.

"Ready?" he asked, once again running the tip back and forth, circling her clit to draw out a moan. She nodded, but that wasn't enough. Bodin stopped at her entrance. "Out loud, June."

Finding her voice, she said, "I'm ready."

He kissed her so thoroughly, momentarily distracting her from what else was happening. Until she felt the pressure. As he slowly pushed into her,

she squeezed her eyes shut.

"Look at me."

Clenching her jaw, she opened her eyes and met his gaze. He rocked into her over and over, each time working his way a little deeper. Stretching her almost to the point of pain. Filling her so much she could barely breathe.

But it was also incredible, this connection with another person. This connection with *him*. This deep, mutual desire, respect, and… love. Because there was no denying that there was love between them. It might not have been the same type of love, but she could feel it in her soul. And that made this moment perfect.

It wasn't painful or harsh, like she'd expected before meeting him. It was beautiful.

It was confirming the thought that had been growing louder in her mind for weeks.

She was home. She'd found where she belonged.

Bodin stopped suddenly, and her brow furrowed. Was that it? She looked down to find them fully pressed together. He was seated to the hilt and smiling at her again. He cupped the side of her face. "Breathe."

His lips brushed her, and then he started moving again. She gasped with the first thrust, but those gasps quickly became moans as the slightly uncomfortable pressure eased into pleasure. Leaning down, he swirled his tongue around her breast before sucking a peaked nipple into his mouth.

"Oh, goddess above." She groaned over and over with each new sensation. Her fingertips dug into the back of his shoulders as she gripped on to him, moving in sync with him, her body taking over on instinct. She needed more friction, more pressure. As if knowing exactly what she wanted, Bodin quickened his pace. He pulled out almost to the tip then slammed back into her. She let out a scream before she could stop herself.

He repeated the motion over and over, dragging out noises from her throat she didn't know she was capable of making. Their ragged breathing mixed as he lifted his face near hers and lowered his hand to her clit.

"Bodin." She couldn't hold it in anymore, the incredible pressure building inside.

"Let go," he said against her lips.

She wanted to. She was so close. But she couldn't help but remember what happened earlier.

“It’s all right,” Bodin said, as if reading her mind. “Let go for me, Juniper. Let your light shine.”

The moment the words were out, she fell over the edge, no longer afraid to show her true self. The climax hit hard. She arched her back and yelled his name as she clenched around him. A white glow radiated from her skin, lighting up the room brighter than she’d ever seen it. He grunted and followed her over that cliff, spilling into her with a low rumbling growl. “*Fuck*.”

She agreed but couldn’t form the words.

“Fuck,” he repeated quieter than before as he slowed his movements, easing her down from the state of euphoria she’d reached.

When he rose above her, she met his soft smile with her own. Her light reflected in his eyes, along with an emotion she couldn’t quite name, but as soon as she started worrying about it, he put a hand to her cheek.

“Don’t. You’re safe. I promise.” He touched a thumb to her lip. Her chest heaved still, brushing against his with each breath, and she nodded, believing him.

“That was…” She trailed off, still unable to find the right words.

Bodin seemed to understand though. “Perfect.”

She nodded again. “So perfect.”

He kissed her for a long minute before sliding out of her. Rolling over, he got out of bed to grab a cloth. He wet it in the basin near the wardrobe then brought it over to clean her up then himself. As he tossed the cloth aside and grabbed a blanket from the end of the bed to drape over them, she moved to his side. He pulled her into his arms, and she hooked an arm around his waist. Lying against him, she basked in what just happened. In all her reading and spying on maids to eavesdrop, she never heard about sex being *this* enjoyable. Not for a woman, and definitely not the first time, at least. Yet another difference between the two kingdoms, it seemed.

“How are you feeling?” Bodin asked in a quiet tone.

“Wonderful.” Yes, she was a little sore, but it wasn’t too bad. She wondered briefly if the effects of the Lumen magic helped with that as well. If she had a small amount of healing ability like many from Gilarn. She’d never been seriously injured before, so she wasn’t sure. Her light lasted longer this time, slowly fading as her heart calmed down. “I think we’ll need to try for an heir a lot. It’s very important for the kingdom, after all.”

His chest rumbled beneath her. “Oh, yes. We should do it as often as possible to help our chances.”

Juniper grinned, but it quickly vanished along with his dying laughter. “I don’t want you to leave tomorrow.”

“I know. But I’ll be back as soon as I can. I promise. I shouldn’t be gone for more than a couple of months.”

“Months?” she screeched, sitting up. “No. Absolutely not.” Her chest tightened.

“June—”

“No, Bodin. It’s too much.” She splayed her fingers over his heart. “Unless you want to take me—”

“No.” His tone mirrored hers.

She’d expected that answer though. “Then, please, don’t be gone that long.”

He sighed. “Four weeks.”

“One.”

Gripping the back of her neck, he pulled her into a bruising kiss. “Three weeks,” he said, pulling back just enough to say, “It takes at least two days just to get there on horseback.”

“Two weeks, and you send a messenger at least a few times to let me know you’re all right, unless you’d like for me to come join you after that point.”

“Burning hells, woman.” He kissed her again, and again. “Next time I need to make negotiations with a pesky merchant or a foreign kingdom sending aid, you’re coming with me.”

Juniper narrowed her eyes, refusing to give in until he agreed. Though, internally, she was thrilled about the compliment.

“Fine,” he said. “Two weeks and a messenger.”

She leaned down to press her lips to his, and he hooked a hand behind her thigh to pull her on top of him. Straddling his waist, she felt him getting hard once more. He held on to her hips as the kiss deepened. His fingers tangled into her hair, and he pulled her head back so that he could brush his lips along the column of her throat.

“Two weeks,” she repeated as she slowly rocked on his hips.

“I promise. Now,” he guided her onto her knees to line him up with her entrance, “are you ready for round two?”

As Juniper sank down onto him, she wondered if they could go all night. She didn't want to sleep because when she woke, it would be time for him to leave. Here, like this, she could pretend the rest of the world didn't exist for a little while.

She could pretend that they would be together for the rest of their lives, that nothing would ever tear them apart.

She could tell herself that her husband loved her as much as she was falling in love with him.

TWENTY-ONE

Bodin

Theran's attack on Forosse was unexpected. Ronna never thought either brother would go that far. She fought to protect her people, and Eryx joined her side. But seeing the two allied only served to anger Theran more. He joined his army on the battlefield, using every bit of his might to defeat his siblings. He vowed to take them out so the world would finally be his.

Bodin ran a finger along Juniper's bare spine with a smile. She was lying fully on top of him, still sleeping. And naked.

He couldn't think of a more perfect way to wake up.

Except, he needed to get going. The sky was starting to lighten already.

"June," he whispered. "Wake up."

Her breathing quickened slightly, so he knew she was awake, but she didn't move.

Bodin chuckled. "I have to go, Sunshine."

She shook her head against his chest then pulled herself up higher on his body to bury her face into the side of his neck. He was hard again, even after going at it for most of the night. Mere hours ago, he'd worshiped every inch of her, and she'd returned the favor—his wife was a quick learner, it seemed. It was well worth the lack of sleep, but before passing out, he had still sent a note to ready a carriage so he could rest on the way to the war camp. It would take a little longer, but he didn't think he'd be able to sit on a horse the whole journey.

Juniper squirmed, drawing attention to the fact that he was pressed to her entrance now. Groaning, he lifted his hips to push in a little, just enough to tease her.

"Don't go," she said, lowering onto him completely. "Stay with me."

A knock on the door saved him from having to answer. He didn't know what he even would have said. Staying with her sounded so much better than going off to the war front, but his people, *their* people were falling, and he needed to at least try to help them—both with his leadership and his magic. He was exceptionally strong. His Noxian magic had been passed down from both parents, but he'd also visited the lake a couple of times as a child and drank from its enchanted waters.

As the door opened, Juniper rolled off of Bodin and he quickly made sure they were both covered by the blankets. He'd unlocked it after their last time together, when Juniper had finally fallen asleep. It was still fairly dark, but he shifted, angling his body to hide his hard-on. Nadine strolled in with a soft smile. It was completely out of character for the sassy woman who liked to rile him up. She lit a couple of lanterns on her way over.

"Good morning," she said, pausing at the foot of the bed. "Laurent had a page find me. He's ready with the carriage and driver, and a few dozen soldiers are already marching north. I thought I would help Juniper dress so she could walk down to say goodbye."

Bodin met his wife's gaze, and she subtly shook her head. He kissed her forehead. "I'll help her, Nadine."

"I'll bathe after saying goodbye," Juniper added.

Nadine nodded. "I will see you both downstairs, then."

Bodin sat up and scrubbed a hand over his face. He climbed out of bed before Juniper could convince him never to leave it again. She had that kind of power, he was afraid. Going to his wardrobe, he glanced back to find her openly ogling him. The corner of his lips twitched as he fought a grin.

Seeing his amused look, she narrowed her eyes then stood from the bed too. Now, it was his turn to stare. The candlelight illuminated her perfect curves. Groaning, he turned away. He heard quiet laughter behind him, and he stopped holding back his smile. This woman… He wanted more days with her, more nights. He wanted to share his throne with her and have children with her.

The thought brought him up short. His heart raced in his chest as he remembered Camille's screams. The blood. If that happened again, if he lost

his family again, he wouldn't survive. There would absolutely be no coming back from losing Juniper. Darkness blurred his vision. Shadows swirled around his hands as the anger and fear bubbled up inside, consuming him. Something tickled at the back of his mind—

"Bo," a calm voice whispered, followed by a soothing touch on his arm. "Bodin, look at me."

He hadn't even realized he'd closed his eyes, but he opened them now, finding Juniper there with him. She had slipped into a shift, and a gray dress hung over one arm.

"What just happened?" she whispered. Her touch sent the shadows skittering, the darkness fading. "What's wrong?"

Shaking his head, he pulled her into his arms. His first instinct was to push her away and protect his heart, but he knew it was far too late for that, so he just held on tightly as she clung to him.

He kissed the top of her head. "Nothing. The past caught up with me for a moment."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Are you trying to stall?"

She leaned back with a sad smile. "Maybe. But I really am here if you need to get it out."

"Thank you," he said before kissing her lips. "Not today. Let's get this dress on you before I rip off the garments you managed to put on already."

Her eyebrows flicked up, making him laugh. He kissed her again, and she stood on her toes, her tongue brushing into his mouth.

"All right, all right."

She laughed when he put her at arm's length and snatched the dress from her.

"I really need to go," he said with a groan.

Bodin helped her into her clothes then dressed himself. Standing behind where she sat at the vanity table, he brushed through her messy blond hair and explained her duties while he was gone. He combed out the tangles and swept his fingers through soft strands. The entire time, she smiled at him. He didn't want to stop, but eventually he finished and went to get his boots.

"Wait, you still want me to hold the weekly levées?" she asked, braiding her hair as he laced up his boots. "I can't do that."

"Yes, you can. You're the queen."

She tied off the end of her long braid and started pacing. “But the people barely know me. Most *don’t* know me. They’re not going to trust me with their problems.”

Finished with his boots, Bodin pushed to his feet. Juniper rambling was one of his favorite traits of hers. She was so beautiful when flustered, even though he hated when she worried. He stopped her in her tracks, putting a hand on each of her shoulders. “You are the *Queen* of Mesairla, and I trust you to do this.”

She placed her hands on his chest. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Follow your instincts. If you have questions, ask one of the advisors—Lewis. He’s one of the noblemen who sits on my council; you remember him?” When she nodded, he said, “Good. He’s staying here along with a couple others in my absence. You can talk to him. He’s a good man and will help if needed.” Lewis had been at his father’s side too. “I trust him, *and you*. You’ll be great, I promise. I wouldn’t trust you with this, or ask it of you, if I didn’t know that you could handle it.”

He released her to grab a sheathed dagger from the smaller desk he kept in here. It was small but just as lethal as any other blade when used right. “Keep this with you. There is an ankle sheath as well for you in the set of drawers by the armoire, but I thought the thigh one would work best for these dresses since they have the long slits.”

Juniper’s eyes widened. “You want me to wear a dagger?”

“Yes.” He knelt and began strapping it around her thigh, but not before kissing her soft skin. “You’re safe here, and the guards will always be with you, especially Richard, but I want to know that you also have the means to protect yourself should you need to.”

“I haven’t practiced in years. What if I don’t remember how to use it?” She swept her fingers through his hair, and he loved the feeling of her nails scratching his scalp. They reminded him of the scratches on the backs of his shoulders from last night.

Grinning up at her, he said, “The pointy end stabs.”

She rolled her eyes, making him chuckle.

He stood and kissed her on the cheek. “Hopefully, you don’t need it. If you do, just… stab and slice until you can either get away or someone arrives to help.”

“Perhaps Richard can train me more,” she whispered. “If that’s all right, I mean.”

Bodin sighed, once again hating how Forosse treated their women. “Yes, Sunshine. Of course it’s all right. I would actually prefer it, now that you mention it.”

She smiled against his lips as he kissed her again.

“The blade was my mother’s,” he whispered. “She…”

Juniper cupped the side of his face. “I’ll keep it safe.”

“It’ll keep *you* safe,” he teased, needing to lighten the mood before he gave in to the grief again. He cleared his throat.

“Ready to head down to the carriages?”

“No, but let’s go.”

They walked downstairs hand in hand, Richard and Samuel following through the quiet halls. It was far too early for there to be many people around, other than the staff preparing for the day. Juniper leaned her head on his arm, and he wondered how it was possible he’d been gifted this wondrous chance with her.

For so long, he was sure he was cursed to live out the rest of his days alone. After losing so much, he’d thought it was better that way. At least then, no one else could be hurt because of him.

He never expected to find someone like Juniper. Someone who seemed to truly see and understand him. Even as a child and adolescent, he hadn’t known it could be like this. His parents had an arranged marriage as well, and while they grew to care for one another, it wasn’t true love. As far as he knew, it wasn’t this all-consuming need to be with them at every second of the day.

It wasn’t like what he felt with June. The wife he didn’t know he needed.

Because that was who she was now. He couldn’t imagine his life without her now that he knew how much better it was with her beside him. It was difficult to even remember how miserable he’d been before her arrival.

As much as it pained him to consider, he knew that even what he had with Camille didn’t compare to this. They’d only had a year together, but he’d thought it was the happiest year of his life. Yet, in such a short time, Juniper has made her way into his heart, giving him a sense of serenity and joy he had never experienced before.

Sharing about the arrangement with his brother relieved so much of the guilt making him keep June away. She hadn’t known about it, and she was

adamant that Bodin understood that a piece of parchment from fifteen years ago that claimed now-impossible things was irrelevant. She'd told him in the middle of the night, while cuddling after another session, the only thing that mattered was that she and Bodin had found their way to one another. That they were exactly where they were supposed to be, with the one they were meant to be with. And he couldn't deny the truth in those words. He felt it in his soul that she was right.

They reached the gravel path beyond the main front doors, and Juniper stopped in her tracks, forcing him back into the present.

"You're going too?" she asked.

Laurent, who'd been waiting at the carriage, looked to Bodin in clear concern, obviously not wanting to upset her.

"I need him with me," Bodin said, sparing his friend. "He's my right-hand man."

"I know. I just… I hadn't realized you'd both be gone." Her voice trailed off, the end almost too quiet to hear, but Bodin caught it.

Laurent must have too because he pulled her into a hug. "Aw, Juni, don't be sad. I'll be back in a couple months."

"Weeks," she and Bodin said simultaneously.

When Laurent glanced at him over her head, Bodin explained, "I promised her I'd be back in two weeks."

Laurent grinned at him, looking far too pleased by this news. "Then, we shall see you in a fortnight."

She continued holding on to him, and Bodin watched his friend's features soften. Laurent didn't know about her magic, but he was aware of most of her past, so he knew this was a big deal for her. She hadn't really had anyone like this in a long time.

Bodin put a hand on her back. "All right, give me a moment with my wife."

Juniper turned, and before she could object, he was lifting her up. She didn't hesitate to wrap her legs around his waist, seeming not to care that the slits in her skirt exposed to her mid-thigh as he kissed her. Any higher, and they probably would have been able to see her pantalettes. He couldn't bring himself to care right now either. Saying goodbye to her was proving to be even more difficult than he'd anticipated. If he knew where they were going was safe, he wouldn't hesitate to bring her with them.

She kissed him deeply, as if she was dreading this goodbye just as much. His palm went to the back of her head, grasping her hair and holding her tightly.

All too soon, someone cleared their throat. He had a feeling it was Richard, but Bodin didn't look away from Juniper as he pulled back just enough to rest his forehead to hers.

"I'm going to miss you," she whispered.

"I'll miss you too." He was glad they had spent the previous night together. Even if they hadn't conceived an heir, he was happy to give her those memories. Despite his promise to make it home alive, there were no guarantees. There never were in war.

"Bo, I…"

He lowered her feet to the ground but didn't release her just yet. "I know."

And he did. If she was feeling a fraction of what he was, he understood perfectly. No matter how much he tried to deny it, he'd fallen for this incredible woman. He tilted her chin up to meet her brilliant green gaze that glimmered in the flickering torchlight. The sun had only barely started to rise.

"Explore more of the doors and the rest of the palace, and I'll be back before you know it. I've asked Nadine to accompany you should you want anyone other than Richard. But will you do me a favor?"

"What?"

"Actually, two things." Bodin pressed his lips to her forehead. "Save the ninth room to go in with me? I'd really like to be with you when you see it for the first time."

She nodded. "And the second request?"

"Find Inaya and tell her I spoke with the royal healer. He'd be happy to have her as an apprentice." Bodin hated the idea of the young woman possibly struggling on her own, and the older man who'd worked for his family for decades was looking for another person to share his work with.

Juniper let out a slow breath, shaking her head. "Why do you let the world see you as a cruel monster? You are anything but."

To hear that she thought so meant a great deal, more than she could possibly know. But the truth was, it had just been easier all these years to shut himself away and focus on the war. Perhaps it was time to share why. He didn't want to frighten her, but he was starting to think maybe she would

listen without judgment. So far, she hadn't balked from anything he'd done or said. For the first time in years, he had someone other than Laurent who he was certain he could trust. Not even Nadine knew his reasons entirely.

"I'll explain more once I return." He kissed her one more time, holding her close—grateful he could. "I'll see you in two weeks."

"Be careful."

"I always am," he said, remembering the day of the attack when he'd left her in the portal room and they'd spoken the same words.

Bodin turned and went to the carriage before he changed his mind. He heard Laurent telling her goodbye before climbing in as well, and then they were off, heading toward the never-ending war.

The camp was set up a fair distance from the battlefield, but the sounds of fighting reached Bodin when they arrived. It had taken two full days to get here by carriage, even with trading out horses in various villages along the way. He'd wanted to switch to horseback on the second day, but Laurent argued that they would need their rest. Bodin knew he was right. Especially if they went to the frontlines to help fight after speaking with the commanders.

The carriage rolled to a stop. He and Laurent got out and immediately made their way to the largest tent on the eastern edge of camp near the mountains. A handful of commanders were already standing around the long planning table at the center.

"What's the situation," Bodin said without preamble, taking an open spot. They bowed their heads, but he waved them off. He didn't care about formalities here. Out on the battlefield, his ranking didn't matter. A sword could kill him just as easily as a lower-ranked soldier.

"Gilarn sent ships across the lake a week ago with fresh troops." Lieutenant Moreau had been close friends with the former king before the latter passed. By some gods-blessed miracle, he'd made it through this war for fifteen years, and Bodin was eternally grateful for his loyalty, experience, and knowledge. "They have pushed our lines back, almost out of the valley entirely. At this rate, they'll reach our camp within a day, maybe two, tops."

Laurent cursed under his breath, and Bodin agreed with the assessment. Looking at the map with figurines to represent each side, he considered everything he knew. The Roumer Mountains spanned the continent, creating a natural divide between Mesairla and Gilarn. The river that split them and flowed into Lac de Rêves was too rocky to travel by boat from the sea, and the lake was surrounded by mountains save for two openings.

To the north of the lake was a small gap that led to Gilarn, and to the south was Valétoi—the valley they were fighting for. Nestled between the rocky terrain, it was spacious enough to give better access to the waters that provided their magic. According to the stories, it had once been a beautiful, lush land. Now, it was tarnished by the war, left bloodied and battered by the near constant fighting.

"We need to reinforce the lines and ensure they do not invade the rest of the kingdom," Bodin said. "There have already been attacks on our villages by small groups who've slipped through."

Except, he was questioning if that was true. Interrogating the prisoner weeks ago brought up the rebel group Umbra, and he couldn't help but wonder if they were responsible for the other attacks too. The Umbra wanted this war, believed those with Noxian magic were superior and should rule the realm. And it wasn't unheard of for them to impersonate Gilarnian soldiers and wreak havoc in hopes of sparking more animosity between kingdoms.

"Have you seen anyone get through?" he asked, glancing at the lieutenant.

Moreau's thick, dark eyebrows furrowed. He shook his head. "Not that I'm aware of."

A few others agreed.

"Regardless, we're vastly outnumbered, Your Majesty. We are barely hanging on at this point," one of the commanders said. Bodin wasn't sure which; he couldn't look up from the map.

"The queen has written to her father to request more men from Forosse," he said, trying to put the pieces together. He was missing something. It kept nudging the back of his mind, just out of reach.

"Will that be enough though?" Laurent asked.

"I don't know…" He didn't know if anything was enough. "It will have to be."

Shouts rang out, and everyone's heads snapped up. A soldier ran into the tent, yelling, "They're here! We're under attack."

Everyone rushed from the tent to find chaos. Smoke billowed toward the sky on the western side of the camp. Moreau stuck an arm out to block Bodin's path as the others headed in that direction with blades drawn. "You should stay here, Your Majesty."

Bodin knew the man meant no disrespect. He had always taken it upon himself to try to protect Bodin when he came here. Not just physically.

"Stand aside, Moreau," Laurent said. "He'll just fight you to get past. There's no stopping him. Trust me; I've tried."

The older commander sighed and nodded before moving. Bodin thanked him before running into the mayhem with both of them flanking him. He unsheathed his sword and struck the first Gilarnian soldier he saw. Four more quickly replaced him. Bodin tapped into his magic to give him extra strength—the same sort of strength that had helped his warriors continue to fight this long, despite being outnumbered.

Then, realization struck. They weren't using magic. If these were truly Gilarnian soldiers, where was the Lumen magic? Where were the shields of light?

Glinting metal swung at his head, but he managed to duck beneath the blade in time. He whirled around to drive an elbow into the man's gut. Spinning, he finished the job with his sword and turned to his next opponent.

Only to be hit in the head, hard.

The world seemed to tilt on its axis as his vision blurred.

As he collapsed to the ground, he heard Laurent shouting his name. He opened his mouth, needing to tell him—

He fell into darkness, unable to hold on.

All he could do was pray that this wasn't like last time.

TWENTY-TWO

Juniper

The three siblings knew war. They'd seen it across different worlds between different species, but to insert themselves in such a manner was unheard of. And while the King of Gods did not approve, he did not stop them. For if they were foolish enough to behave as humans, they could stay among them until they remembered their place. Only then would they be welcome back to the stars.

When the messenger arrived the day before, Juniper had been so excited that she'd run to receive the letter herself. She'd ripped it open with a wide smile.

Until she saw Laurent's signature instead of her husband's.

Richard had caught her when her knees gave out and carried her to her bedroom. He and Nadine repeatedly told her Bodin was fine, only injured, but she could barely hear them. She just kept reading pieces of the note.

Bodin was knocked unconscious in an attack on the camp.

He's alive but remains incapacitated.

She'd known something bad would happen. The moment the carriage had rolled away, Juniper had been plagued with a sense of foreboding.

He had told me of your agreement on the way here, so I'm sending this message in his place.

We are heading back early, but it will be slow traveling.

Juniper had never pictured herself as the kind of woman who would lie in bed, weeping over a man. Yet, she couldn't stop. She hadn't eaten or

bathed. Nadine had forced her to drink water and had helped her out of her gown, but other than to use the lavatory, Juniper had not left her bed.

She was so scared. For Bodin. For their soldiers losing ground—though, they had managed to push back enough to save their camp, it seemed.

But she was also terrified of what this meant for her. If he died out there, where would she go? She didn't think they would let her keep her crown here, but she couldn't go home. She refused to return to a life in the shadows.

The door opened, but she didn't turn over to see who had entered. She simply stared out at the mountains. Their massive size made them appear closer than a couple days' journey. She could not see the war camp or valley from here though. She couldn't see where her husband lay injured.

"All right, that's enough," a deep, familiar voice said as he rounded the bed to face her.

Her chest tightened as she looked up at her older brother. "Hugo?"

"Juniper," he said, shaking his head as if disappointed. "Richard says you've been here since yesterday; it's time to get out of bed."

"I can't," she whispered. "It hurts too much."

He let out a slow breath. "You're the queen; you're supposed to be leading in your husband's absence."

She scoffed. "Like you care? You don't even think I'm capable of that."

"Then, prove me wrong." Hugo brushed her hair from her brow.

The gentleness was too much. It reminded her of how close they'd once been. He'd been her best friend. She'd thought the world of him. And then, he'd left her like everyone else.

When new tears started to fall, he sighed and said, "Fine, move over."

As soon as she made room, he climbed onto the mattress and rolled to face her.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Rafe and I might have stolen a battalion or two after Father got your request and refused to answer."

"What?" Her traitorous heart thudded with hope.

Hugo reached over to swipe the fresh tears from her cheeks. "We're leading them ourselves, and we agreed to send a hundred men here to help protect the capital. Rafe was going to come with them to check on you, but he's better at commanding the soldiers than I am, so I promised to see you instead while he and Delroy continued."

Of course it wasn't his idea to visit her. He didn't truly want to; it was just the better option. She lowered her gaze so he wouldn't see how much it hurt to understand that. Then, his words registered. "Delroy? Why is he with you all?"

"Because he is one of the best swordsmen we have, and he wanted to help."

She scoffed again in disbelief. Delroy rarely acknowledged her existence, even before her confinement to tower life. There had to be another reason.

"Believe it or not, your brothers *do* care about you."

Her eyes burned. That wasn't true. There were seven of them in total, and after Hugo stopped visiting her tower, the only one she ever really saw was Rafe. He was the only one who'd acted like he loved her over the last decade. Trying to focus on the rest of Hugo's words, she said, "Nearly two battalions are marching toward Valétoi?"

"As we speak."

"Good. That's good." She sat up against the headboard, and he followed. That would help Bodin. She looked down at the letter still clutched in her hand. Laurent had written about the attack that took place shortly after they'd arrived, and while it hadn't lasted long and they'd made it out mostly intact, the frontlines weren't faring as well.

"Juni?"

A sob ran through her. It had been so long since he'd called her that. She finally turned toward him, the question she'd longed to ask him bursting out, "Why do you hate me?"

To her surprise, Hugo put a hand over hers on the bed between them. He stared at their hands as he said, "I've never hated you."

She rolled her eyes before she could help it, trying to pull her hand away from his. "For years, you've ignored me. The few times we did interact, you treated me like… like—"

"I know," he whispered, cutting her off. "But it wasn't because I hated you. You were my best friend, Juni."

"Then, why?" she asked, finally succeeding in snatching her hand away. She'd pondered that for so long. They had been nearly inseparable, and then one day, he just vanished from her life. He had never shown any signs of being afraid of or disgusted by her magic until one day he suddenly told her

he couldn't stand it. At first, she thought he was teasing and jealous, but he'd treated her differently after that.

She'd been so sure that he would be the one person to never care. His abandonment hurt worse than anyone else's, even their mother, who'd started keeping her distance years earlier.

"Because Father threatened…"

She straightened and turned to face him more. "He threatened you?"

"No." Hugo met her gaze, and she saw it then. The sincerity. The *pain*. "He threatened *you*."

Her brow creased. "I don't understand. Why?"

"Because I started looking into magic and questioning things," he said in a soft tone, seeming almost relieved to finally be talking to her about this… explaining things. "He kept insisting it had to have come from an ancestor, but I went through the family tree and the histories. In every bit of research, I found two consistencies: that amount of power has to come from the lake itself or a parent or grandparent; anything further out is too diluted to be that strong, and neither side of our family had anyone from Gilarn as far as I was able to trace back to."

The strength of the magic depending on close relations was exactly what Bodin had said too. Her head reeled. Before she could ask more, he continued.

"And since it's hereditary, if it's that powerful in you, then we should have it too. At the very least, *I* should have it." The last few words were quiet, like he didn't want to speak them.

She swallowed. "What are you saying?"

Hugo took her hand again and rubbed his thumb against her knuckles, relief evident when she didn't pull away. "I started questioning your lineage, and that's when Father forbade me from speaking of it again. When I wouldn't, he told me I could no longer visit you, especially since I'd already been demanding for years that he let you out of that damned tower."

"You had?" How had she not known this?

"Of course," he said as if it were obvious. "But… well, you know me. I couldn't just stop. I even went to Mother privately, and she begged me to drop it for all our safety." After a moment, Hugo added, "And I think I figured it out."

Juniper wasn't sure she wanted to hear the truth at this point. What good would it do now? Swallowing, she asked, "What?"

“I have no proof, only what I’ve gathered from maids and putting things together. Mother and Father wouldn’t confirm or deny it—”

“Hugo.” She tried to stop his rambling, but he went on.

“But after voicing the theory, he told me that if I ever spoke of it again or told anyone, including you… he… would get rid of you.”

Her eyes widened. “Get *rid* of me?”

He nodded. “At that point, I didn’t know if he meant he’d send you somewhere or…” Sighing, he leaned his head back on the ornate wood. “I was only fourteen, so I believed him, and I wasn’t willing to chance it. Even when I was older, he would remind me of the threat to get me to fall in line and do whatever he wished. He knew how much I cared about you, and he’s used it against me for over a decade, Juniper.”

Stifling a sob, she pulled her hand free and scooted closer to hug him. His arms wrapped around her without hesitation.

“I thought that by being mean to you, you wouldn’t want me to visit anymore. I thought it would make it easier and keep you safe.” He put a hand to the back of her head, holding her like he had when she was a little girl. It broke her heart. “Then, when we found out that Bodin was wanting to trade riches for men, I went to Rafe with the idea of the arranged marriage.”

Juniper leaned back. “It was your idea?”

“Yes. I ended up telling him everything; I trust him more than just about anyone in the world, especially when it comes to you. He’s always loved you so much, and he used to shout at me for not visiting with you anymore, knowing how much it hurt you, but I just couldn’t tell him the truth… I couldn’t risk you like that. After I explained, he agreed it was the perfect way to get you out of there, but we wanted to find out more about Bodin first. We doubted the stories were true, and we were lucky enough to speak to a former worker from the palace. They confirmed that he was closed off but never cruel, so Rafe went to Father and proposed it as a way to receive more money.”

She’d been aware that her father sold her, but to hear it out loud still hurt.

There was a question she had to ask though. He’d skipped over a detail she desperately needed.

“What did you find out about me?” She held her breath, afraid of the answer. The possibilities were endless.

“Remember, it’s only based on hearsay.”

“Hugo.” She’d started to piece it together, and she knew what he’d been implying, but she needed him to say it to make it real.

Taking a visibly deep breath, he said, “I think our mother had an affair… with someone from Gilarn.”

She closed her eyes and leaned against him.

“That’s why they hid you away when the war started,” he whispered. “It would have been bad enough that his wife had another man’s child, but in that case, he could have thrown the two of you out and moved on.”

“But no one could know that the princess had the blood of the enemy,” she said, piecing it together. “They would have spread rumors about the royal family working with Gilarn, like he planned the entire thing to have children with magic.”

Hugo nodded against the top of her head. “It would have brought war to Forosse.”

TWENTY-THREE

Bodin

Ronna and Eryx fought for their lives against Theran and his light dwellers. But Ronna didn't have magic like they did, that could be used in a war. Eryx used his shadows to block and push; it gave him and his people extraordinary strength. But Theran's army could heal over and over, and their light could shield against the darkness. No one could defeat those who didn't die.

At least, that was what the gods thought. For they too were thought to be immortal. Fighting in the battle wasn't a concern when they believed themselves invincible. But nothing is truly untouchable.

Not even a god.

Someone was pounding a nail into Bodin's skull. That was the only possible explanation for the amount of pain in his head. He blinked his eyes open and groaned.

"Welcome back," Laurent said from his spot next to the cot they must have dragged Bodin onto.

Then, he realized his cot was moving. Bodin tried to sit, but the piercing agony was too much, forcing him to recline once more.

"Whoa, there. Take it easy." His friend offered a waterskin. "Drink this. It should help."

"How long have I been unconscious?" Bodin asked as he took the water. He sipped on it and grimaced at the bitter taste. Not just water, then. "What is in this?"

“Willow bark, and it’s been five days.”

Cursing, Bodin pushed himself up again, clenching his teeth through the pain, and glanced around. They were in a carriage; trees blurred through the windows as they passed. “What happened in the attack?”

“It wasn’t their whole army who invaded, just a small portion. We were able to take them down fairly quickly.” Laurent raked a hand through his hair.

That didn’t make sense. Then, he remembered. “First Kehlir, and now the camp. Why do you think they are sending these small numbers when there’s no chance of them surviving?”

It was a rhetorical question, and judging by the way Laurent’s eyes widened, he knew it. “You think Umbra was behind this?”

“I think they’re responsible for a lot we aren’t aware of,” Bodin said, glancing out the window once more. “And where the fuck are we, Laurent?”

Bodin drank the rest of the horrible water before handing Laurent the waterskin and sitting upright fully and turning to face him. When he started to pitch forward, his friend grabbed him.

“You need to lie down, Bo.” Laurent tried to guide him back, but Bodin refused. “We’re on our way home.”

“What? Why in the burning hells—”

“You were unconscious,” Laurent interrupted in a rare angry tone. “The healers did what they could, but you wouldn’t wake up. We didn’t know if you ever would, let alone when. So, after a day of no changes, I made the executive decision to get you out of there.”

“Laurent, that wasn’t—”

“It was too dangerous. Not just for you but the entire camp. Can you imagine what the Gilarnians—*or the Umbra*—would have done if word reached them that you were incapacitated so close?”

Bodin shook his head and immediately regretted it. He gently rubbed his temple. “We’re in the middle of a war—nearing the end if the reports are correct. We don’t have time to waste; we need to go back.”

“We’re almost to Tusan, where we’ll stop for the night. We’re less than a day’s ride from Kehlir,” Laurent said. “Besides, I already sent word to Juni. She knows we’re coming.”

Bodin groaned, leaning his head back on the seat. “What did you tell her?”

“The truth—that you were unconscious but alive.”

“Shit. Now, she’s going to be worried.” That was one of the reasons why he hadn’t wanted to get attached, why he hadn’t let anyone get too close after losing two wives, a child, his parents, and his brother within a nine-year span. He knew better than most that their time together was limited. There were too many factors in play that could rip them apart. He didn’t want Juniper to know that kind of agony, and he couldn’t live through it again himself. Especially not with her.

“I hate to break it to you, but she was already worried before we even left.” Laurent bumped his foot into Bodin’s.

“*More* worried, I mean.” He knew she’d been scared. She’d visited the meadow again when he was traveling to the valley; he’d felt her presence there, as well as faint traces of her melancholy.

“She didn’t want you to go.”

“I didn’t want to leave her,” he confessed in a hushed tone. “She’s…” How did he even begin to express how much she meant to him? It sounded absurd to feel so deeply for a woman he hadn’t known for very long. To miss her so fiercely. But this was Laurent, the person who’d known him since they were children.

The man who was currently chuckling, clearly far more aware than Bodin gave him credit for. “You love her.”

Was he that obvious? He didn’t respond right away, which was answer enough. At last, he said, “I didn’t think I could feel this way again. After Camille, I swore to myself that I wouldn’t. Even with Bea, that wasn’t love. I cared for her, but this…

“I thought I’d found and lost my one great love,” he said, looking out the window as the edges of the small village came into view and the carriage slowed. “But Juniper makes me think that maybe we’re granted more than one chance in this life. I loved Camille—I always will—but June…”

He glanced over, and Laurent gave him a genuine smile as he waited for the end of Bodin’s revelation.

“It’s just so much… more. I think June is my soulmate.” Like this entire time, they were meant to find one another.

“Have you told her this?”

Bodin shook his head. “How can I? We barely know each other, and—”

“Whose fault is that?”

Ignoring him, Bodin lowered his voice. “We didn’t even consummate the marriage until the night before you and I left. It’s far too soon.”

Laurent rolled his eyes as they pulled to a stop, presumably close to an inn. “I might not be an expert, but I do know that there is no time limit on when people can fall in love—I imagine that to be even more true with soulmates. Also, did you forget who you’re talking to? I know you don’t give your heart lightly, Bodin. You wouldn’t say you love her if you didn’t mean it.”

“But she—”

“She lights up when she sees you.”

He almost laughed but managed a cough to mask it. His friend didn’t know how true that statement was. Laurent raised a brow, but commotion caught their attention before he could ask anything. Shouts rang out.

“Not again,” Bodin said with a sigh. He didn’t have the strength to fight more rebels or soldiers if it was another attack.

Laurent pushed open the door and jumped out, giving Bodin a look to stay inside. Of course, he ignored it. Holding on to the carriage door frame to keep his balance, he used everything he had left to stand and get out. As he searched for the source of the noise, flashes of a similar night six years ago bombarded him. He clenched his jaw, trying to hold on to his control and stay in the present, reminding himself that Juniper wasn’t here. She wasn’t in danger like Beatrice had been that day in the forest. Still, his shadows came to the surface, whirling around his hands as he realized his sword was gone.

His guards climbed down from the carriage and their horses to stand around him. The thundering grew closer, like hundreds of hooves and feet. Bodin stumbled along the street, with Laurent grabbing him and giving him support to make it toward the southern end. Villagers scrambled into the closest homes and slammed doors.

He could not let these people perish.

Reaching the end of the street with his handful of men, he stilled at the sight before him. At the thousands of men marching and riding their way.

Bodin’s heart pounded in his chest. They were going to be slaughtered. He glanced at Laurent who nodded in silent agreement. They would face this together, just like they always did. Taking a deep breath, Bodin turned to one of the guards. “Evacuate the villagers. Their homes won’t protect

them. Get them into the woods. Hide. *Something*. Just get them away from here."

Two men took off, running toward the small houses and huts.

They could not fight this many soldiers and hope to make it long. Especially when he could barely stay on his feet.

"There's no chance of convincing you to leave?" Laurent asked.

"You know there's not." Bodin lifted his chin. "It's too late for that anyway. We're the only things standing between that army and these innocent people."

Laurent relented, but one of the guards started talking about him needing to leave and find safety because he was the king, yet Bodin barely heard any of it. His focus was on the approaching army. On the red flags sailing in the wind, sprinkled throughout the ranks.

"No one is going home today," he said, the corner of his mouth curling up. "Call our men back. The villagers are safe."

"What?" someone asked, clearly confused.

The tension left his shoulders, and he walked out to meet the front rider as he said over his shoulder, "My wife sent reinforcements."

Dismounting his black destrier, Prince Rafe inclined his head. "I heard you could use a little help."

"I'll admit," Bodin crossed his arms, fighting to stay upright, "when June wrote to your father a couple of weeks ago, I didn't think he would send any more men."

Behind him, he heard Laurent telling the others to stand down. Rafe came to a stop in front of the king. "He didn't."

"Then, how are you here?"

"Hugo and I gathered the troops ourselves and brought them against our father's orders."

Bodin's eyebrows shot up. "Why would you do that?"

"You're family now, Bodin." Rafe stepped closer to put a hand on his shoulder. "My father might not see it, but we do. Did you know my sister has been writing to me, well before she sent her request for aid? She sounds happier than ever, and I know that's because of you."

His throat tightened. "I am happy with her as well."

That was putting it lightly. Judging by Rafe's smirk, he knew it too. Another man dismounted while the rest of their soldiers continued to the field just west of the town.

“You remember my brother Delroy?” Rafe said, pointing to the man who looked eerily similar to him. The only difference was Delroy’s hair, which was a darker chestnut color. “He’s a captain and our best swordsman. He volunteered to help as well.”

Bodin dipped his head in greeting and appreciation—not to mention surprise—before glancing around for the younger prince. “Where is Hugo?”

“He took a slight detour with a hundred men to Kehlir,” Delroy said.

Bodin nodded and regretted it. His head still throbbed, and now that the adrenaline was wearing off, the dizziness had returned. “You sent him to June?”

“He insisted he go, actually.” Rafe moved closer, holding a hand toward the inn close to where Bodin’s carriage sat. “Why don’t we find a place to sit, and I’ll tell you about their complicated relationship. You look as if you’re going to pass out. Delroy, get our men settled in. We’ll continue north first thing in the morning.”

Agreeing, Bodin led his brother-in-law toward the inn. Laurent joined them, and they found a table inside near a blazing hearth. For the first time in too long, a spark of hope flared to life. With this many soldiers, they might actually stand a chance.

They could end this once and for all, and he could live out the rest of his days with Juniper. The thought alone made his chest feel lighter. Taking a seat, he sought out that connection he had to his portal lands and felt her in one that had wide plains that spanned the base of a cliffside. Closing his eyes, he could almost picture her standing high above, watching the wild horses running past, her long blond hair flying in the wind around her. She seemed lighter than before, and he was glad that Hugo had gone to her. Hugo wasn’t with her in the portal though. And after years of secrecy, Bodin found that he wanted her to share these places with her brothers. If she trusted them, that was enough for him.

He was happy Laurent had sent a letter, and that he would be home with her soon. Even if he couldn’t stay long. He would need to head back to the valley as soon as possible.

But in less than a day, he could hold Juniper in his arms and tell her just how much he loved her.

TWENTY-FOUR

Juniper

1 DAY EARLIER...

Eryx hated his brother, but not enough to end his life. Not until Theran went after Ronna. She had never done anything to deserve his wrath. She'd fought for peace for so long, and this was how she was being repaid for it, apparently. And then, Theran did the unspeakable.

In the dead of night, he crept into the castle in Nortussa. And Ronna's remaining family, her descendants, were all slain by the God of Light.

"I cannot take another day of this," Juniper said, tilting her head back against the tub.

Nadine stopped gathering her clothes and such to prepare her for the day and sat on the stool beside the tub. "Of bathing, Your Majesty?"

The jest made Juniper chuckle. She shifted to face her, resting her arms on the side of the tub with her chin atop them. "No. Of sitting around and waiting. My brother was right. Just don't tell him I admitted that. Ever."

Hugo had left the night before, wanting to catch up with the others. He hadn't stayed long, but the visit meant everything to her. For the first time in years, she felt like she had her best friend back. It would take time to really return to what they'd once been, but at least they had talked. She understood his behavior now, and it broke her heart—both for what he'd gone through, as well as the time they'd lost.

As for the rest of what they had discussed, she struggled to wrap her mind around it.

She wanted to speak with her mother, but it needed to be without her father present. And she wouldn't dare put those details in a letter. When Bodin returned, she would ask him about inviting her mother to come visit. Though, the queen hadn't even attended their wedding, so it was impossible to know what it would take to get her here.

"Your secrets are safe with me." Nadine moved closer to her side and lowered to her knees.

Juniper smiled at the woman who'd become one of the closest friends she had ever had, along with Laurent. "Can I ask you a question? What's going on with you and Laurent?"

Now, it was Nadine's turn to laugh. "Nothing."

Lifting her head, Juniper raised a brow in disbelief.

"He flirts with everyone, and it's a little… flustering at times, but that's all," Nadine said. "When I was younger, I used to fancy him. I'll admit that. He's attractive and genuinely a good person. But he's a little too much for me."

"He's a little much for everyone," Juniper teased before a wave of sadness washed through her. "I miss him."

"They'll be home any day now. Then, you'll see that Bo is all right."

"I hope so," she whispered.

They sat in silence for a few moments before Juniper finished cleaning up and got out of the tub. She wanted to go into the village today. The first couple of days after Bodin left, she had done as he requested—before her short period of wallowing—checking in on those who'd suffered in the attack, along with others she'd seen mingling in the streets.

She had even found Inaya, the young healer. Bodin had been correct about her not having anyone. Her father had died in the war when she was a child, and her mother passed away last season. She was on her own and working where she could in order to get by. When Juniper had mentioned being an apprentice to the royal physician, Inaya hadn't hesitated to jump at the opportunity. She'd been so excited that she moved into the healer's quarters that night, ready to get to work the next morning.

Today, however, Juniper had other plans. After getting dressed, she met Richard and Samuel in the hall and told them her plan to go into the village again. She stopped before getting too far and turned back to her room. "Nadine, would you like to come with me?"

"I can do that. Whatever you need."

Juniper shook her head. “No, I don’t mean to help me. I mean as my friend.”

Nadine’s features softened, her dark red lips curling into a smile. “I’d love to.”

Together, they made their way down to the streets. She and Nadine talked to the villagers, visited the little shops, and bought so many sweets that she was fairly certain she would be sick by the end of the night. It amazed Juniper how open and friendly these people were toward her. When she and Bodin did this, many of them avoided him or watched him warily, but it wasn’t like that now. Sure, a few still kept an eye on her. It felt like they did it more out of curiosity though than fear.

A bell chimed the late-morning hour, and Nadine sighed. “I should get back to the palace. I usually help my mother prepare for dinner.”

Juniper nodded in understanding.

“No,” Nadine said as Juniper turned to head back. “You keep doing this, whatever you want.”

“Are you sure?”

“Definitely. Have fun; explore the city more.”

Juniper hugged her, and then Nadine was off. She’d been so distracted that she hadn’t even started on her quest for the day—the reason she’d come out here at all. Not that she didn’t enjoy time with her friend, but now, she could focus.

It had been weeks since Juniper arrived here, but glancing around the sunny street, the freedom was almost overwhelming. Blinking away the moisture in her eyes, she took a deep breath. It would take a while to get used to this—having friends, being able to go wherever she wanted, do whatever she desired.

“Princess?”

A soft laugh escaped her at the wrong title as she turned toward her guard who so rarely crossed that line of formality these days. “I’m fine.”

He took a hesitant step closer. “Are you sure?”

Exhaling, she nodded again. He’d seemed even more distant since the night Bodin made him leave their room, and she hated it. She wanted things to return to normal between them. “I am. I was just thinking about how strange it was not to have to sneak around anymore.”

The man smiled, wrinkles forming near his hazel-green eyes. “Yes, well, I have to admit that I like the fact that I don’t have to chase after you

anymore."

Juniper's chest ached. Since coming here, she'd noticed a change in his demeanor. It sent a wave of guilt through her every time she thought about how he was also forced to leave his home to stay with her. Closing the space between them, she wrapped her arms around his middle, not caring that they could be seen by anyone walking by. This particular street was quiet but not empty. Richard slowly returned the embrace.

"Thank you," she whispered. "For always being here. I know you drew the short stick in getting sent with me, but I'm glad—"

"Juni," he pushed her back enough to meet her eyes, "I wasn't sent against my will." He brushed the fallen tears from her cheeks with callused fingers. "I volunteered."

"You… what?"

"Well, more like demanded." He gave her a sad smile. "Did you think I'd let anyone else come to this new place with you? That I would trust anyone else to look out for you?"

She couldn't process his words, couldn't understand when she'd felt so unloved for so long. But she realized that wasn't true. He'd stood beside her, whether it was outside her door back home or following her through Nortussa, day in and day out.

"I don't know what to say," she whispered.

"You don't need to say anything. I just wanted you to know the truth," he said. "I know your upbringing was… difficult and you were often lonely, but you didn't let that tarnish your outlook on life. You have the biggest heart of anyone I've ever met, and I'm glad you are content here, even if it's not the path you might have chosen for yourself."

"I don't have any idea what I would have done if given a choice, but I'm more than content. I love it here. The people, the freedom, my—" She cut herself off, her cheeks heating.

"Your husband?"

She hadn't told Bodin yet, but it was true. Nodding with a smile, she said, "My husband."

"Despite what you may have learned in Forosse, that's a good thing." He kissed her forehead. "You worried me the other day."

"I know; I'm sorry. Things were… complicated." She wanted to tell him the truth, but this wasn't the place. If Bodin could accept her magic, she had no doubt Richard could. "He didn't hurt me. I promise."

Richard nodded and lowered his voice so that no one else could hear. “If he does, I don’t care if he’s the king. I will destroy him.”

Juniper shook her head and quickly said, “He wouldn’t. He’s a good man. We had an argument, that’s all. We made up for it.”

Her cheeks heated, and she looked away. After her first time with Bodin, she realized just how loud they had been. Horror had consumed her at the thought of this man hearing them. Apparently, however, when Bodin went to check the hall, Richard was not there. Samuel and another guard had been though, and the former explained that Richard had retired early for the night.

Thank the goddess.

“I’m glad he treats you well,” Richard said. “You deserve to be loved.”

“It’s only been a week, but I miss him so much,” she said, picturing the way he held her that final day.

“I know.”

The image in her mind morphed to Bodin lying on the battlefield, blood pooling beneath his broken body. People dying all around him. Laurent dying.

“Juniper.” Samuel’s voice cut through the panic she suddenly found herself in.

Richard’s hands gripped her shoulders until she met his gaze, then one cupped the side of her face. “Take a deep breath for me.”

“H-he’s hurt,” she said in a shaky tone.

Richard guided her closer to the nearest building, and Samuel followed. The latter said, “What can I do?”

Before her guard could respond, she said, “What c-can any of us do?”

There had to be a way to end this war. Visiting the villagers was good, but she still felt useless. She wanted to do more to help this kingdom—*her* kingdom—and to do that, she needed to learn more. That was why she was here today, why she’d come to begin with. She needed to find a way for them to win, or at least stop the war. She needed to figure out what exactly happened to Elias that led to the former king breaking the treaty and attacking Gilarn. Would Bodin consider calling a truce? Or did he feel as strongly as his father about getting vengeance?

“Breathe, Juni,” Richard repeated.

She obeyed, taking one deep breath, then another. Once she finally calmed down enough to speak and think rationally, she said, “I need to find

that bookstore."

"Perhaps we should return to the palace." Richard hesitantly released her and stepped back. "You can get some rest, and then we can return and continue."

"No." She shook her head and began the trek toward the shop. "I need to find every book I can on this war. I'll also search the royal library, but I—"

"Your Majesty," Samuel started.

"I need to understand why this is happening over and over throughout history, and I need to find a way to make it stop. This has to end now before the entire realm is destroyed." That might have been an exaggeration, but not by much. If they continued down this road, eventually, there would be nothing left to fight for. "If I could just figure out exactly what happened fifteen years ago—"

"Your Majesty," he said again, moving into her line of sight, and this time, she stopped and glared at him.

"I'm not going to rest. I'm done sitting by and—"

Samuel lifted a hand in front of himself, waving for her to stop. "I was only going to suggest your husband's private study instead."

"His study…"

"There is a little-known tradition in the royal family of keeping journals and passing them down," he said. "Meaning, the king has his father's innermost thoughts from when he declared war. He has his ancestors' journals as well. If you can find them, you might be able to find the answers you seek."

Grinning at the guard, she thanked him, turned on her heel, and took off in the direction of home, abandoning her earlier plan. The two men kept up with her, one on either side. As they made their way through the winding city, she asked Samuel, "So, what do you know of the king's study? Have any suggestions on where to start?"

Bodin's study wasn't huge, but it was filled to the brim with books, ledgers, and even scrolls. Juniper had been skimming through them most of the day, trying not to watch the clock and wonder how soon he'd be home. Laurent

had said in his letter that they were leaving right away, but it would be a slower journey. Especially if they were stopping to care for Bodin often. It had been four days though. According to Samuel, he should be back tomorrow or the next day at the latest.

Sitting sideways in one of the large armchairs, Juniper sighed and flipped through yet another ledger. They'd yet to find any journals, but there were countless books about the war and magic. However, most of the important details were what she already knew.

Seeing the number of estimated losses each year nearly made her sick though. So much death.

"Richard?"

"Yes, Your Majesty?" He sat in the opposite chair—at her insistence—reading various accounts as well. She trusted him more than just about anyone, and she couldn't make it through this on her own. Nadine sat on the floor with her own pile, and Juniper had Samuel searching the library for anything helpful as well, with the help of the archivist.

"Would you mind having the page fetch a maid for tea?"

Pushing to his feet, he said, "Of course."

"I can get it," Nadine said.

They both waved her off. Juniper shook her head. "You are not a maid tonight. You're my friend who's helping search for a way to save our kingdom."

Nadine smiled and looked back down at the book in her hands, but not before Juniper saw a suspicious sheen in her eyes.

As Richard went to the door to talk to the young boy outside, Juniper set her ledger aside, stood, and stretched her back. She went to the wide mahogany desk and instead took her husband's seat. One by one, she started searching the drawers for what she was sure was the tenth time. She kept thinking that was where she would find answers. But it was the same records she'd read over and over.

Richard returned and neared the desk. "You should get some sleep or fresh air."

"I'm fine," she said as she stood again and went to the tall shelves behind her.

"You've been at this all day, Juni."

Glancing at the grandfather clock in the corner of the room, she realized it was nearing midnight. Juniper sighed. "Why didn't you tell me what time

it was? You should have been off duty hours ago."

"Because I'm not here as a guard," he said, echoing her statement to Nadine. "I'm a friend here to help. Besides, I hate the idea of you being alone."

Her throat tightened. "I'm not alone though."

"Juniper—"

"I'm fine." Even she didn't believe herself.

Richard stayed quiet for a moment before moving to her side. "Apologies, Your Majesty. I'm just… worried about you. I always worry about you, but I'm also so proud of you, of the woman you've become."

When he put a hand on her shoulder, she faced him. Tears lined her eyes. She stepped closer to the only father figure she'd ever really known and wrapped her arms around his torso for the second time that day. Richard held her tightly, his lips pressing to her temple.

She'd been so caught up, that she forgot Nadine was there watching this play out until her maid switched books and dropped one. Nadine winced and whispered, "Sorry. Ignore me."

Juniper chuckled but turned back to Richard. After a moment, she asked, "Why did you decide to leave your family to come with me?"

He ran a hand up and down her back in a soothing gesture. "I didn't have much family to leave. My parents both passed when I was younger than you are now. I have a sister and two nephews, but I…"

Juniper waited a moment before saying, "But you what?"

With a sigh, he leaned away to meet her gaze. "Do you know how long I've been your personal guard?"

"For as long as I can remember."

"You were four years old," he said. "For seventeen years, I have been at your side, Juniper, not only protecting you but watching you grow. *You* are my family."

She sniffled and hugged him once more. "You're mine too. You've been a father to me more than… In all the ways that matter, you are my family too. I can't tell you what it's meant to have you stay with me. I was devastated at thought of leaving you behind, of not having you in my life day-in and day-out."

"As was I," he whispered, pressing another kiss to her head. "I love you, Juni. I never had children of my own, but I consider you mine."

Trying not to sob, she squeezed him a little tighter. "Love you too."

After a moment, when she got her emotions under control, she released him. Clearing her throat, she returned to the desk, sneaking a glance at Nadine. Her friend stayed quiet but was watching them with concern. When she noticed Juniper's attention, she gave a small nod, as if silently reminding her she was here for her too—then went back to her reading.

Wiping away her tears, Juniper thought about his words, about how he'd never had children, and couldn't help but ask, "Were you ever in love?"

"Once… a very long time ago."

"What happened?" Something beneath the desk caught her eye, and she pulled the chair back to get a better look.

"She married another man." He'd said it was a long time ago, but his voice was still full of grief.

"I'm sorry." She paused her search to meet his gaze. "You deserve to be loved too. And if she chose someone over you, then that's her loss. She sounds foolish."

He shook his head. "I don't know if she really had a choice in the matter. For too long, the women of Forosse have lacked control over their own lives. It makes me sick."

"Me too."

A knock sounded, and as he went to open the door, she knelt by the desk. If she hadn't approached from that angle, she never would have seen the tiny latch against one of the inner sides.

"Juniper?" Richard said, setting the tray of tea on the desk.

She tugged on the latch, twisted it, pushed it. Nothing worked. "There's something down here, but I can't open it."

He hesitated, shifting his weight from one leg to the other.

Grinning up at him, she said, "Please help me?"

"You want *me* to break into a secret compartment in the king's desk?"

"Yes?" She voiced it like a question, shrugging a shoulder.

"You do realize that I'd be committing treason, right?"

Juniper rolled her eyes and began pulling the latch again. "No one but us would ever know."

He glanced beyond the desk.

"Fine, besides us and Nadine."

"I'm certainly not going to tell," Nadine said, her voice getting closer as she joined them. "If you don't try, I will."

He sighed and yanked the chair farther out of the way to get on his knees beside Juniper. “Fine. Move.”

She chuckled and made room for him. It took a few tries, and he eventually pulled out a dagger to use as leverage, but he managed to get it open. He didn’t reach inside though. No, he saved that part for her. The second he got out of the way, she put her hand into the small compartment. Her fingers brushed what felt like leather, and her breath caught in her throat.

Juniper pulled it out, skimming her fingers across the cover before opening it.

But it wasn’t just a book. It was a journal.

Bodin’s journal.

TWENTY-FIVE

Juniper

Devastated by such tremendous loss and consumed by grief, Ronna gave in. She ordered her army to Valétoi to stand beside that of Mesairla. At her side, Eryx promised her vengeance. He vowed to fight to the death if that was what it took to defeat Theran.

And he kept that vow.

Juniper pulled her blanket up around her, shifting to find a more comfortable position as she continued reading Bodin's journal. She hadn't wanted to intrude on his private thoughts, but she hadn't been able to stop herself either. A tiny voice inside had told her that this was important, this was what they needed.

That was last night. She had brought it to her room with the promise to get some sleep, and instead, she had curled up in bed with a lantern on the small table next to her and read until she fell asleep mid-sentence as the sky began to lighten. When Nadine came in to ready her for the day, Juniper claimed she needed to rest. Nadine, Richard, and Samuel knew the truth, but to anyone else, she would simply seem tired from worry. She also had Nadine tell people she had a horrible headache and wasn't feeling well so that no one would expect her downstairs or bother her here.

Nadine had asked if she found anything that could help, but Juniper hadn't been ready to discuss what she'd read. It was a lot to take in, and

honestly, she still didn't have the answers entirely. She'd needed to read it again when she wasn't fighting to keep her eyes open.

So, that was how she spent the entire day.

At first, she had just skimmed through the pages. She was only searching for information on his father and the war, not his private thoughts. But she soon realized it was all entwined. There was no separating one from the other.

He wrote about his family a lot in the beginning. And to her surprise, the entries started before the war broke out. Before his brother was killed.

Elias has no idea that our parents are arranging his marriage already at nine years old. They have made a deal with the King of Forosse. Elias is to marry the youngest of the king's children, their only princess—Juniper.

That had nearly stopped her heart the first time. She traced a finger over her name now. It was so strange to see it here.

Bodin went on to talk about how guilty he felt that the arrangement wasn't for himself. But his parents had insisted the only reason why they were doing this was to help the other kingdom. Forosse had been struggling then too, and it seemed her father had offered the same deal. His daughter and an army in exchange for riches. Mesairla hadn't needed extra soldiers at the time, but knowing how often fighting broke out in the valley, Bodin's parents agreed it would be a good idea to have them in case history repeated itself in their lifetime.

Bodin's parents knew he had already set his sights on Camille, so they didn't want to force him to marry a different person. Not to mention a princess so much younger than him.

Their plan is to bring Juniper here right away, raise her so they grow up together and hopefully become friends. Then, when they are of age, getting married shouldn't seem like such an imposition. It still feels wrong to me though, taking away their choices.

Of course, he felt that way. Bodin cared about others with his whole being. It pained Juniper to know that most of his people didn't see that. They didn't know how everything he did was for them.

She skimmed through until she reached his brother's death. The words scribbled here made her chest physically hurt. Her heart ached for Bodin.

He'd just been playing outside with his new friend. They were so innocent, so young. It's not fair. It should have been me. The assassin was looking for me when they saw him sneaking into the palace that day.

I don't even know what happened to the sweet little girl…

She disappeared, and I can only hope it's because she was rushed back to Forosse with the rest of their envoy. I saw her playing with her light magic with Elias in the gardens that day, so it will be safer for her there.

While being interrogated, the assassin finally admitted he was from Gilarn. My father is outlawing Lumen magic. I think he's going to declare war.

Juniper stared at the page in confusion. She vaguely remembered playing with the prince—not that she knew who he was—and they had shown each other their magic, but something strange kept standing out to her about that.

She had told Bodin that Richard had been with her because he always was, and that even he hadn't been able to stop the assassin. But the more she thought about it, she didn't remember her guard being around. If he had been there, she wouldn't have shared her magic. She'd been told since she was a toddler to keep it a secret, even from the guards and castle staff.

Richard didn't know about her magic, so he couldn't have been with them. So, where was he? Why was she alone with the prince? Where were *his* guards?

Something wasn't adding up. She thought about needing to talk to Richard while skimming through more, drawn toward the last filled pages

that had haunted the little sleep she managed to get last night.

The rest in between talked about the war, but it wasn't anything that could help. Most were details she already knew. Then, there were entries about Camille. She had to skip past the parts regarding her traumatic death. The first time she read it, Juniper had cried so hard she nearly made herself sick.

Then, there were a few pages on Beatrice. He hadn't loved her, that much was clear, but he cared for her and considered her a friend. It had been heartbreaking to him when they struggled to get pregnant, but the idea of succeeding also terrified him.

All of it was dark and painful after his brother's death. But nothing compared to the last dozen pages. With a shaking hand, she turned to the part about Beatrice's death. His parents' deaths. The horrifying monster that had attacked Bodin, Beatrice, and their guards in the woods and then found its way to the palace, killing dozens of people along the way.

Bodin had witnessed their gruesome ends. He'd failed to save them. But in his attempt to capture the beast, he discovered the magic to create new worlds. Worlds only accessible by a door that could be locked and reinforced by his magic. Worlds that didn't include people who could be hurt.

Many of the pages regarding this period were impossible to read. Ink crossed out various lines, others seemed to be written over one another. It was often illegible, as if he'd poured his grief and anger out through the words.

Every bit of it broke Juniper's heart. He'd gone through so much in a relatively short amount of time, and he'd lost nearly everything.

I used one of the old cellars that had been abandoned long ago. A large round room with twelve doors—prison cells, my father once told me, from before they built the new dungeon. This strange new power let me create a forest in which to trap the monster. No one knows but Laurent, for it would not have been possible without his help.

I owe him my life.

He saved me, and then had my back when I needed him most. Not once did he flinch from the danger. Even when I urged him to run far away, insisting I was cursed to lose everyone I loved.

Laurent stayed. He has never left my side, and for that, I owe him so much more.

Juniper set the journal down and swiped at the tears rolling down her cheeks. She knew they were close, but this… Sniffling, she made a silent vow to thank Laurent when they returned. She would gratefully endure all of his ridiculous antics for the rest of her days.

Drying her hands on the blankets, she picked up the journal and resumed. After trapping the monster, Bodin continued practicing with his newfound magic. The rest was filled with sketches. Beautiful landscapes she'd visited through the portals were illustrated across several pages, as if he'd needed to plan them here first. They were almost as breathtaking as the real thing. She'd had no idea he was artistic in this way.

Except, following them, it grew darker and darker. There were eerie forests, foggy lakes. She stopped on a drawing that chilled her to the bone. A terrifying creature stared at her from the book, surrounded by dead trees. The monster he and Laurent had trapped.

It was difficult to determine what she was looking at precisely; it wasn't like any animal she'd ever seen. It seemed to be made of shadows, with eyes that stood out against the darkness and extra-long, sharp fangs.

Juniper swallowed and turned the page, not wanting to see it anymore. But the next few were only about the monster, as if he couldn't stop thinking about it, and then there was nothing. Just as she'd seen the night before. She kept hoping there was more information that could help them.

Flipping toward the beginning, she stilled on one of pages marred by a lot of ink. She turned it over, looking at it from the back. Through the black spots and lines scribbling across everything, she noticed one word repeated over and over.

She hadn't even noticed before. It was nearly impossible to see unless holding it at the right angle. The letters were backward looking at it this way, but there wasn't any doubt in her mind what they were. The one word

written over and over, crossed out, covered, and written again in Bodin's pain and agony.

One word that sent a shiver down her spine.

Umbra.

The rebel group who wanted this war because they believed those with Noxian power were superior. But why had her husband written their name so many times?

This journal wasn't giving her any answers. All it did was leave her with more questions than ever. Groaning, she slammed the book shut and tossed it onto the nightstand. It hit the corner, and she quickly reached out to stop it from tumbling, but something fell out of it, clinking against the floor. Juniper's forehead creased as she tried to see what it was.

Making sure the journal was steady, she climbed out of bed and knelt.

With shaking fingers, she held the small object up into the sunlight. Her heart raced as she examined the ornate iron key.

The key designed to match the twelfth and final portal door.

Which she now knew was actually the first.

The one he created to contain that vicious monster.

TWENTY-SIX

Juniper

The battle lasted decades, lifetimes for most humans. But to the gods and goddess, it was the blink of an eye. The destruction of their people and world meant little to them anymore. All they cared about was power, just as their father had always intended.

Pacing back and forth across the hard floor of her bedroom, Juniper repeatedly tapped the iron key against the palm of her hand. She knew deep in her soul that it was the key to the twelfth portal. She also knew that Bodin had hidden it away for a very good reason. He didn't want her, or anyone, going through that door.

Except, she couldn't get past this feeling like she was meant to find the key.

When he first told her that one stayed locked because it was too dangerous, she'd been beyond curious about what it was. Now, she knew why.

But it didn't put to rest that urge to see for herself. She'd returned to the pages about it, reading it over and over. In his notes, Bodin described the monster as powerful and vicious, unstoppable. He'd trapped it in there to protect his people. That was *why* he'd created the first portal. He couldn't kill the creature, but he'd managed to lure it through the door then locked it inside.

Something tickled at the back of her mind again, that guiding feeling that had been present most of her life. The warmth she'd believed was

Ronna growing up.

And right now, that sensation was begging her to go toward this monster. It was important.

A horrible thought flittered through her mind. If it was that vicious, could it somehow be used against their enemies? Unleashed on the battlefield to take out the opposing army?

But then what? According to Bodin, it was invincible. There was no way to kill it or control it, so it would be just as dangerous to them as it would be to their enemies.

Regardless, she wanted to go down there now and see the being for herself, get a better grasp of what it was. And Bodin wasn't here to stop her. Neither were Laurent or her brothers. There was no one to tell her that it would be a horrible idea.

That was what she told herself until the door to her room opened and Nadine walked in. The maid must have seen Juniper's thought's playing out on her face because she stilled, automatically suspicious. "What?"

"Nothing." Juniper curled her fingers around the key and nonchalantly lowered her arm to her side. She'd already hidden the journal in the chest at the end of her bed so no one else would stumble upon it.

"You look guilty." Nadine continued to the armoire, where she hung up a couple of freshly laundered dresses. "What did you do?"

"Nothing, really."

Her friend didn't seem to believe her, but instead of pushing her, she asked, "Did you find anything?"

"No." Juniper wasn't sure why she was lying. Then, as if she couldn't stop herself, she said, "I just… I was wondering what's behind the last portal door." Did the woman know the truth?

Nadine slowly turned toward her. "Bo doesn't let anyone in there. We know better than to push him about it. It's the one thing he will not bend on."

Sighing, Juniper sat on the edge of her bed. "I know he said it's dangerous, but what could be so bad in there that he doesn't let anyone use it? What's he hiding?"

"You know how they work, right?" She moved to lean against the corner bedpost with her arms crossed.

"He created them with his magic," Juniper said. "They're places he's either visited or imagined, brought to life."

“They come from his mind.” Nadine nodded and pushed off the bed to go grab a dress for Juniper to help her get ready—as the time was apparently much later than she’d realized.

Juniper had agreed to make it down to dinner since a few of the advisors had gathered, but now she was regretting it. She had other things she’d much rather do.

Nadine returned with a pale lavender gown that reminded her of what she might wear back home, with its layered skirts instead of the thinner ones she’d started getting used to. The top, however, was where the similarities ended, with its low cut, leaving her shoulders exposed. “So, it stands to reason that it’s a private place. It’s a piece of him he doesn’t want to share.”

Juniper still couldn’t tell if Nadine knew the truth. He’d written that only Laurent knew, but it appeared as if he hadn’t added anything to the journal in years. She thought maybe he’d shared it since then, but she really couldn’t be sure. Regardless, she understood what her friend was saying. It didn’t make her any less curious though. If anything, it made her want to see it even more. Almost like something was physically pulling her there.

Nadine shrugged. “We all have our demons—secrets we keep to ourselves. As the king, he has many.” Before Juniper could ask more, she started helping her change. “He’s opening up to you. You might not see it, but those of us who knew him before you got here definitely do. He loves you, trusts you. If he wants to share that place with you, he will, but it might take time.”

Juniper nodded then went quiet as she continued getting ready, taking in her friend’s words.

Keeping the key hidden from the maid literally dressing her was tricky, but she managed it. Once she was set, Nadine left, wishing her luck and telling her she would see her tonight.

Juniper opened her fist to look at the key again. She knew Nadine was right, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t drown out the nagging curiosity. The need to see what was behind the door for herself was like an ever-present itch she couldn’t—and probably shouldn’t—scratch.

All she would have to do is sneak away from her guards, go down, and unlock it. The physical act was simple, but did she want to go behind Bodin’s back to do it?

Grabbing the dagger and sheath Bodin had gifted her sent a pang of guilt and longing through her. She missed her husband so much it physically hurt. Missed his rare smile that he reserved just for her, the way he accepted her, cherished her. The feel of his hands on her body when he first strapped the blade to her thigh beneath her dress. The soft brush of his lips over her skin and how he filled her so completely—body, heart, and soul—when they finally shared a bed.

Her skirts didn't have a slit—which was annoying now that she'd gotten used to the Mesairlan style of always having them—so the dagger stayed near her ankle, and she slid the key into a small pocket she found sewn into the soft fabric. A plan had already taken root by the time she was heading toward the door.

Juniper made her way to dinner, a smile in place and her chin raised like Bodin had taught her. She greeted the councilors and apologized for her absence today, to which they waved off her concern. As they discussed plans on how to secure Kehlir from future attacks, she managed to force down her potatoes and pork, but only in small bites. Her stomach was too twisted up to eat much—whether from guilt, anticipation, or a combination of the two, she wasn't sure.

The entire time, she felt the weight of the portal key in her pocket. She needed to know if the creature locked away from the world could save them all. She needed to know if there was a way to use it to their advantage.

Though, she wasn't entirely sure how to figure that out.

She hoped seeing it in person would help. At this point, the urge to do so was too strong to deny. It was as if a force outside of herself was pushing her to go.

Then, a word caught her attention, and she nearly choked on a carrot. One of the men started to stand, but she shook her head. "I'm fine. What did you just say about Umbra?"

"Just that we weren't having any luck on that front, Your Majesty."

She cleared her throat and took a sip of her water to give her time to find a way to ask what he was talking about without seeming clueless.

Thankfully, Lewis jumped in, as if reading her mind. "We've had our spies searching for them since the man from the attack confessed they were part of the rebel group, not Gilarn's army, but none have been able to infiltrate far enough to figure out if there was a bigger reason behind the

attack here. The king asked us to keep him updated, but since he is not here, we thought we would at least let you know it's still in progress."

"Yes, thank you." She nodded, trying to hide her surprise. Umbra was behind the attack. What else did Bodin think they were connected to? He'd written their name over and over in obvious pain in his journal, so it was clear he thought them responsible for the deaths of his family in some way. She just didn't know how.

When they continued their discussion, she met Lewis's gaze and gave him an appreciative smile. The older man dipped his head once. Bodin had been right about him. He was a good one to have around.

Waiting an appropriate amount of time, she excused herself, claiming she still had a headache and needed more rest. They each stood as she exited, bowing their heads, but none made to follow. Thank the goddess.

"Are you all right, Your Majesty?" Samuel asked as he and Richard followed her toward the stairs.

Juniper nodded. "Just tired. I'll be fine."

She avoided Richard's gaze as they walked through quiet, darkened corridors, lanterns and candelabras lighting her way back to her room. The sun had fully set while they were eating.

She had just told him yesterday how strange it was not to need to sneak away anymore, yet here she was, about to do just that. Unlike ever before, however, she felt truly guilty for making his job more difficult.

"Richard, can I ask you a question?" she finally asked as they reached her floor.

"Of course."

"All those years I was running off, why didn't you stop me?" She'd always wondered, but now she had more she needed to know, and this was the first step. "How did you know I would always return to the castle?"

He sighed as she faced him near her door. "I didn't."

"But you never tried to stop me from leaving…"

"No, I didn't." Richard crossed his arms and tilted his head slightly. "Because I never agreed with locking you up. I understood that the world was growing more dangerous, but it didn't make sense to keep you so… imprisoned when none of your brothers were treated the same."

So, he really didn't know the truth. She clasped her hands together in front of her, wringing her fingers. "What if I'd tried to run away? Would you have just turned a blind eye?"

“Of course not,” he said.

Her heart broke a little bit.

Until he added, “I would have gone with you.”

Her throat tightened. “W-what?”

“If you had wanted to really leave, I would have gone with you.” He stepped closer, lowering his arms and taking one of her hands, forcing her to stop twisting her fingers. “Why do you think I insisted on coming here? I honestly thought the wedding would be the last straw and you’d make a break for it. I wanted to be here if that happened. So long as I’m living, you will never be alone.”

“Richard,” she whispered, tears burning her eyes. “Where were you during the assassination?”

Samuel had remained quiet behind her, to the point where she almost forgot he was with them, but she could practically feel the way he tensed at the question.

“What?” Richard’s brow creased, but she saw the concern in his hazel-green eyes. He knew what she was talking about.

“Prince Elias. We were playing in the garden when we spotted the assassin sneaking into the palace. H-he killed him, and n-no one was—” Her words cut off with a shaky, involuntary breath.

Samuel moved closer, his presence at her back a silent comfort. She hadn’t known the man long but knew without a doubt that he was loyal. He had been with this family for nearly a decade. Therefore, he knew how much Bodin had struggled over the years.

“Juni, what are you accusing me of?” Richard’s hushed voice was full of a pain she felt in her own chest.

Shaking her head, she said, “I’m n-not. I just don’t underst-stand why we were alone. You were always with m-me, but on that day, you were… you were gone.”

“You ran away from me that morning.”

“But you *always* follow me,” she said, her tone growing harsher.

“Juniper.”

She ripped her hands away and stormed into her room. It didn’t surprise her when he followed. He always followed—until he didn’t, it seemed. Snatching up her cloak, she draped it over her shoulders and marched right back out with both guards on her heels.

“Where are you going?” Richard demanded. When she didn’t answer, he grabbed her by the arm and turned her toward him, something he’d never done before. Before he could speak though, Samuel was there.

“Let go of her.”

Richard held her gaze, silently begging her to listen to him, but she couldn’t right now. Too much was swirling through her head. She needed fresh air. She needed a place she could scream and cry without anyone hearing her.

She needed to go where she would be able to feel connected to her husband.

“Richard,” Samuel barked. “Release her. Now.”

He slowly let her go. Only when she started to turn away did she notice Samuel’s hand on the pommel of his sword. As if he’d been prepared to fight one of his own for her. She swallowed and then looked at Richard again. The man she’d always trusted more than anyone in this world.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

And then, she was running. She raced away from them, ignoring Richard shouting her name and cursing as they chased after her.

She darted through the palace, taking a roundabout route to hopefully throw them off. By the time she was sneaking through the art gallery, all sounds of her guards were gone. Only when she finally reached the circular room did she pause. She pulled the key out of her pocket and stared at the door just to the left of the stairs. The first portal Bodin had ever created.

Slowly, she moved closer and ran a hand along its carvings. The pattern was strange and unlike the others with its bare trees. Darker, somehow. She traced a curling vine along the edge of the door, then she put her hand against the lock in the center.

Could she really do this? She didn’t want to betray Bodin, but it was eating away at her, making it impossible to think about anything else.

A warm presence enveloped her, encouraging her to continue. Her hand raised with the key almost of its own volition, but then she stilled. That guidance stopped, as if giving her the final choice. Her heart thundered in her chest as she thought through everything Bodin had written about this place and the monster within.

When the door opened at the top of the stairs, she knew her time was up. It was now or never. Before whomever rounded the curve in the stairwell—presumably Richard, as Samuel still hadn’t been to the room of

portals—she inserted the key and turned it. Taking a deep inhale, Juniper entered the twelfth portal and closed the door behind her, turning the lock to keep others out.

As soon as she lifted her eyes to look around, her stomach sank.

And just like that, she understood exactly why Bodin kept people out of this place.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Bodin

When it became clear to the people that their gods no longer cared for them, most stopped fighting. The war faded into smaller and smaller battles until only the three siblings were left facing one another in the Valley of Stars.

There, day and night had their final battle.

Bodin let out a frustrated groan and threw a stick into the crackling fire. Hugo had shown up earlier in the evening, and after a quick confirmation that Juniper was fine, they all made their plans to continue toward Valétoi first thing in the morning.

Except for Bodin. Everyone agreed that he should go home and rest for a few days before rejoining them.

Because apparently, being the king meant nothing here. None of them cared, regardless of how hard he tried to explain that he needed to return to the camp. He wanted to see June, but now that he knew she was fine, he was contemplating how to steal a horse and ride north with Rafe's men without them noticing.

"Go to Juniper," Laurent said, tossing a twig at him. They sat around a fire between the Forrossan army's tents and the small town.

Hugo took a seat next to Laurent with two flasks. He handed one to his brother on his other side and took a swig before saying, "She misses you and is worried sick. When I got there, she was wallowing in bed and hadn't

left it all day, from what I'd been told. We stayed there talking for a while, but by the time I was leaving, she was up and ready to carry on."

Laurent grabbed the flask out of Hugo's hand and gulped whatever it contained, ignoring the way the man glared at him. The prince snatched it back, making some drip down Laurent's chin in the process.

"Juni isn't one to do that," Delroy said, rolling his eyes at the two acting like children. "Even I know that."

Bodin sighed but couldn't deny it was true. She wasn't the type of woman to lie around in bed because she was upset. She was too fierce for that.

In the back of Bodin's mind, he felt a faint presence—Juniper entering the room of portals. He realized she hadn't been visiting them much since he'd left. Having her in his mind calmed him, letting him take the first deep breath in days, and reminding him that he actually did want to go home. It just wasn't the right time. He would write to her, explain the situation, and then travel north with the others. He had to.

They needed to turn the tides of this war so that she was safe, along with the rest of their kingdom.

His attention was so narrowed onto what he was going to do that he didn't catch it at first. The air left his lungs in a sudden whoosh, making him topple forward to his knees. A piercing pain shot through his skull. He ground his teeth and held his head in his hands.

At first, he thought he'd been hit again, but no. This pain was so much worse.

Realization struck, and he looked up at the blanket of stars above them. Why was she visiting a portal this late in the evening?

"What's wrong?" Laurent shouted as he appeared next to him, sword drawn, looking for an invisible enemy.

A hand landed on his shoulder, then two people were hauling him up and back onto the log he'd been occupying. He didn't try to deny the help. Not when he could barely see. Not when Juniper's fear consumed his entire being.

Forcing them to release him, he bent over and heaved the little food he'd managed to get down earlier. Wave after wave of worry, terror, and grief washed over him. By the time one of them was shoving a waterskin to his lips, he was grabbing at his hair, trying to stop the agony long enough to do something about it. He couldn't speak though.

Something was very, *very* wrong.

"Bodin," a deep voice said. "Is it your head?"

"Bodin!" Another man knelt in front of him, snapping his fingers near Bodin's face. "So help me, if you make my sister a widow at—"

His eyes jerked up to the Crown Prince of Forosse. "Rafe, I—"

An invisible band tightened around his chest, and he gasped, rubbing the spot over his heart. Darkness encroached on his mind. It pushed and prodded, trying to take control. *No!*

He met his best friend's eyes. Laurent looked as horrified as he felt. Bodin wondered if he could see him losing this internal battle.

Let go, King, a deep voice whispered.

But Laurent was louder. "Stay with me."

Grinding his teeth, Bodin managed to get to his feet. He needed to get out of here. Beside Laurent and Rafe, Hugo reached out to steady Bodin, but there wasn't time to get reoriented. There wasn't time for anything. Focusing on Juniper, on the feel of her in that forbidden place, he pushed past the princes.

"Someone bring me a fucking horse!" he shouted at no one in particular. A soldier took off toward the makeshift stables.

"Two!" Laurent yelled after him, to which Rafe added, "Four!"

"Four?" Bodin asked, already following the boy. He staggered, and Laurent put a hand on his shoulder.

Rafe kept pace with them. "Something is clearly wrong. I'm not letting you traipse off on your own. My sister would never forgive me, for one."

"None of us are," Hugo added, and then with a sigh, "and he's right, Juni would probably disown us as brothers."

They reached the stables and found the young soldier preparing one of the horses. Bodin didn't have time to wait for him to saddle more on his own, so he jumped in to help. As did the other men.

He was distantly aware of Rafe giving Delroy instructions to continue tomorrow as planned, and that they would join him after making sure that Juniper and everything in the capital was fine. Bodin didn't have time to worry about that. He took half a second to thank the gods that his friend had made him head home when injured. If he'd been near the valley still, there was no way they would have made it in time—he wasn't sure they would make it even from here. But instead of focusing on that, he focused on how he was also grateful they were going with him. If what he feared was true, it

would take all of them to stop the impending travesty. Even if that meant sharing his secrets. He would do it.

For Juniper, he was beginning to think he would do just about anything—actually, he knew he would. There was no point in denying it anymore.

It wasn't until they were leading the horses away from the stables that Rafe asked, "Will you at least tell us where we're racing off to?"

Bodin's jaw clenched, and he mounted his mare. "Kehlir."

"I don't understand," Hugo said. "You were just arguing that you didn't want to go home yet—which, you better hope Juni doesn't learn about that. Why are you rushing back now?"

"Because something *is* wrong. I… I can feel it." He waited for them to get on their horses.

Concern filled their gazes. Laurent's eyes held more understanding as realization dawned. "You think she…"

"Yes," Bodin said without hesitation.

"Fuck," Laurent hissed. Only he knew just how bad this was.

"One of you tell me what in the burning hells is going on." Rafe guided his horse closer, the urgency starting to truly register with Juniper's oldest brother, judging by the look on his face, but Bodin was ready to leave.

He had to get home. There was no time to waste. That damn woman had found a way to open the Ombrete's portal. Doing so posed a threat to everyone in that palace and in the village beyond. But none more than Juniper herself.

She was there, in the *one* place he never wanted her to see.

Preparing to dig his heels into his horse's sides, he said, "We're going to save my wife."

Who better live long enough for me to throttle. His boiling blood rivaled the dread coursing through him as the four men raced south toward his home. Toward the love of his life, his soulmate, and the doom she faced because of him.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Juniper

Theran and Eryx fought as gods with all their might. The war of power caused great devastation throughout the realm with natural disasters, famine, and more death than the humans had ever seen. It went on and on until the slightest distraction turned the tides. In trying to help, Ronna accidentally drew Eryx's attention just long enough for Theran to strike.

Opening the portal had been a mistake. Juniper knew that the moment she locked the door behind her. That guidance she'd felt, the warm encouragement was nowhere to be found now. She was utterly alone.

She slipped the key back into her pocket and stepped forward, her boots crunching the ashen grass that seemed to cover these lands. Her chest ached as she looked around the blackened field that stretched out before her and the forest lining either side. The back of her throat burned, and she covered her mouth in horror. This place wasn't dangerous. It was dead.

And it came from her husband's mind.

Shaking her head, Juniper walked farther into the world. She needed to see more. She needed to understand why he'd created a place that screamed of so much pain and misery. Needing to trap the monster was one thing, but why this?

It was daytime here, not night like in the real world she'd fled from. The sky above was as gray and gloomy as everything else though, and a slight

chill in the air made her wrap her arms around herself. She was glad she'd thought to grab her cloak.

There weren't any signs of the creature from the journal. In the other portals, they had to travel inward a bit to get to the main destination, so she headed into the woods in hopes of finding something.

Juniper's heart broke more and more as she trekked through the gray and white trees. It was so eerie here. And she couldn't find anything among the decaying forest. Not a single bit of color or life. It was as if it had all been burned up. Shadows covered the ground the farther she went into the forest, the trees getting closer together and blocking out what little light made it through the overcast sky.

A twig snapped, and she nearly screamed in surprise as she whirled around. But nothing was there. Telling herself it was probably just a decayed limb falling, she slowly turned back around.

Her breath caught in her lungs. Juniper squinted to try to see through the thick shadows before her. But then, they began to shift and move. She took a step back.

Two eyes appeared in the darkness, and her pulse hammered in her chest.

What she thought were simply shadows… was the monster. It was real.

Not wanting to startle the creature, she cautiously retreated without taking her eyes from it. The shadow seemed to grow as it slowly followed her. She bent forward without stopping, thankful for what training she had as she reached beneath her cloak and skirt for her dagger with trembling fingers. When the heel of her foot hit caught on a root, and she started to trip, she sucked in a breath that sounded too loud in this otherwise silent place.

She managed to catch herself on what appeared to be a fallen log, but it was too late. A strange glow emanated from the darkness, and she realized whatever the creature was had opened its mouth.

Everything suddenly clicked into place.

The burned lands. The supposed danger.

Giving up any sort of hope of fighting this thing off or sneaking away, Juniper forgot about her dagger, jumped to her feet, turned, and ran. A burst of flames exploded behind her. This time, she didn't bother holding in her scream as she ducked on instinct. She rolled, but the fire had caught her

cloak. Ripping it open, she let it fall to the ground as she scrambled back to her feet and raced through the trees again.

Juniper dove behind a wide tree trunk just as another ball of flames flew past. She bolted up and ran toward the door. If she could just make it to the palace, she would be safe from this monster and could pretend this never happened. Chancing a glance over her shoulder, her heart skidded to a stop.

It was… gone.

She whipped around, searching while continuing in the direction of safety. Except… the monster wasn't the only thing missing.

When she reached the dried-up field she'd first come from, the door was nowhere in sight. She turned, looking from one end to the other, but she couldn't see it. Running a hand over her hair, she tried to stay calm while thinking. Had she returned in the right direction? Or had she remembered the path wrong?

A shadow passed overhead. Juniper craned her neck and barely stifled a gasp. Time was up. She couldn't delay any longer. Not as the shadow creature flew across the sky, its black wings spanning wider than she was tall. It almost looked like one of the dragons from her childhood stories… except much more frightening.

Juniper wasn't going to wait for it to get close enough to see those specific differences though. It roared above her, and she dashed into the trees, hoping they'd offer coverage.

She sped through the dead forest, looking frantically around her, but couldn't find her way to the door. The creature circled overhead, roaring and raining fire in spurts, letting its anger be known. Heat licked at her skin, but she didn't dare stop. Tears rolled down her cheeks, and she wasn't sure if they were from crying or the smoke. It didn't matter, she supposed.

When it turned away, no doubt to do another sweep by, she fled in a new direction. If she could just lose it…

Spotting an outcropping of large boulders that created a small shelter, she ducked beneath them to catch her breath. She knelt and covered her mouth with her hand, listening for signs of the monster. The flap of wings told her it was nearby but still in the sky. She brushed the tears from her face, wondering what to do now.

She could keep running, searching for the door, but if she didn't find it, there was no way she could fight that thing. Her dagger couldn't stop fire. It wouldn't protect her here.

Juniper looked down at her hands wondering if Lumen magic could stop it. Light dissipated shadows. But she didn't know how to call forth her power to even attempt that. It appeared with strong emotions, but it had long since stopped when she was upset or full of fear. As a child, her parents reprimanded her for it, especially her father. He scared her into hiding it, and even though she wasn't sure how—her fear of him and determination alone, she supposed—she managed to suppress it. Now, only the faintest glow shimmered from her hands when terrified or extremely sad. It was brightest when her husband had his hands on her.

The tears continued as a silent sob wracked through her. She should have listened to Bodin, to everyone who told her to leave this place alone.

Gods above, she wished he was here.

Except, then he would be in danger too, and that was the last thing she wanted.

Juniper's heart ached. That creature had killed her husband's family. It had lived here in this place created from his mind. And she knew Bodin could sense these portals. Had he felt the destruction of this forest as it burned?

A new thought made her queasy. He'd known when she entered the others. Could he still sense it while he was far away? Had he known she came here against his wishes?

It was getting too quiet beyond her hiding spot, she noticed, now that her breathing wasn't so loud. She hoped that meant the monster had given up, but she knew she wasn't that lucky. Settling in, she decided to wait a bit longer in hopes that it would think she was gone. Then, she would sneak out and search for the door again.

The sky was starting to darken. Juniper wasn't sure how long she'd been sitting here. Every time she thought it had been long enough to sneak out from her cover, she convinced herself to hold off a little longer. In reality, she knew it wouldn't help. She just didn't want to face that *thing* yet.

If she waited much longer though, it would be too dark to see anything, and there was no way she could escape a shadow creature once night fell.

Taking a few slow, deep breaths, she tried to prepare herself. She peeked around the large boulders. Not finding any sign of it, she crept out. It was impossible to tell where the sun was in the sky to indicate the direction she was walking in, but it didn't really make a difference. She didn't know which way she'd come initially, she'd gotten so turned around.

Careful to watch each step, Juniper made her way through the forest as quietly as possible. However, with the light fading, she knew she couldn't move too slowly.

Juniper's heart raced in her chest as she neared what appeared to be another clearing. Hoping it was the same field that housed the door, she inched to the edge of the treeline.

A hulking black figure slammed into the ground, blocking her view before she could even look for her escape. The creature was even more terrifying out in the open like this, where she could see it better. Its body appeared solid but was made of shadows that writhed and twisted. Long, sharp claws extended, just as she'd seen in the sketches, but they didn't concern her nearly as much as the mouth that could spew flames.

She slowly backed up, bending to slip her dagger out, determined to get it out of its sheath this time. Even though she knew it wouldn't do much good. Especially if it didn't have flesh to stab.

When it let out a roar, she turned to run, but she didn't make it far. A claw reached out and grabbed her by the ankle, and she hit the ground hard with a scream. Rolling to her back, she sliced at the creature, refusing to go down without a fight—if she could help it, she would not make her husband a widower for the third time. Its shadows whirled above her, unaffected by her blade.

"Please," she whimpered as it placed its very corporeal foot on her abdomen to hold her down. She tried to cut at it again, but the dagger still didn't harm it. How was this creature both solid and only smoke?

It cocked its head to the side for only a moment before opening its large mouth once more. The air heated to an uncomfortable temperature, and it hadn't even used its fire yet.

Juniper closed her eyes as a sob ripped through her. She didn't want to die here, alone. Would anyone ever know the truth? Would Richard forgive her for not listening to his explanation? Would there even be remains for Bodin to find? She pictured her husband, remembering the sweet—and steamy—kiss they'd shared when he was leaving. If he put the pieces

together, she feared he would blame himself. He carried so much guilt already; she didn't want her death to weigh on him too. Or on Richard after their argument.

The monster snarled, and she prayed to the gods that it would be a quick death. She heard its deep inhale—

And its firm hold on her disappeared as it let out a ground-shattering roar. Juniper sat up and slapped her hands over her ears, her eyes snapping open. She screamed again as hands gripped her shoulders. When she swung around on the ground with her dagger, Richard caught her wrist.

"Richard?" She let out a sob. "How—" Another growl cut her off, and she turned back toward the shadow creature.

Toward the five men in the field now standing between her and the danger.

"Get her out of here," Bodin yelled, his hand outstretched at his side. Black smoke similar to that of the creature swirled around his fingers as he faced the demon.

"Juni." Richard hauled her to her feet and tried to guide her away. "Come with me."

The monster charged at her husband, and she screamed once more. Her hands raised in front of her, glowing, but it wasn't enough to do anything. Her magic was useless!

Bodin made a circular motion with his own hand and seemed to throw his dark magic at it. Samuel joined him, his own Noxian magic swirling at his fingertips. Laurent, Rafe, and Hugo were there too, swords drawn.

"Go! Now. All of you," Bodin shouted.

"No," Juniper said, not wanting to leave him behind. She urged her power forward, begging it to help them, not caring who saw it. Still, it did nothing.

Hugo appeared in front of her and didn't hesitate to sheath his sword and haul her over one shoulder. She screamed and shouted, smacking at his back as he carried her away. She couldn't leave Bodin. Richard and Rafe followed, but Laurent and Samuel stayed with him, until the king yelled for them to go too.

"Let me down!" she cried. "Bo!"

Her brother didn't listen. He ran across the field, and within moments, they were through the portal and in the quiet palace. Only then did he lower

her. She tried to push past him, but he and the others blocked her path. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she shook her head.

“Please.” She wasn’t above pleading. “We have to go back. W-we can’t… I c-can’t lose him l-like this.”

Hugo’s gaze softened, but he still didn’t let her pass.

“Please,” she repeated as her breaths grew even more rapid. “This is a-all my f-fault.”

Laurent and Richard turned to face the door, watching the magical fight beyond. It was Rafe who stepped closer to her with open arms. She collapsed against him, nearly hyperventilating. He was whispering soothing words, but she barely heard him over the roaring monster trying to kill the man she loved.

TWENTY-NINE

Bodin

Eryx fell to his brother's knees, and not one of them understood what was happening. A god was said to be unstoppable, immortal, but Eryx's life source bled from his human form as crimson pooled beneath him. For generations, people claimed they heard Ronna's screams around the world as she watched her favorite brother die.

Seeing the Ombrete standing over Juniper was Bodin's worst nightmare. It opened its fanged mouth, and June turned her head away, closing her eyes. Even over the sound of his pounding footsteps as he ran toward them, he heard her whimper. The Ombrete sucked in a breath—

And Bodin launched himself, tackling into its side. He rolled with it to the edge of the field. Jumping to his feet, he unsheathed his sword while holding his free hand out to the side. He didn't dare look behind him. Instead, he trusted that Richard and her brothers would get June out. Taking a deep breath, Bodin released some of the tight hold he kept on his magic. Tendrils of black smoke whirled around his fingers.

He'd hidden the extent of his dark magic for so long. The power that was the exact opposite of his wife's Lumen power.

The creature roared, but when it tried to dart forward, Bodin threw his magic out to stop it.

More shadows joined his, and he glanced over briefly to find Samuel at his side.

“Get her out of here,” he shouted over his other shoulder. They could only hold this thing back for so long. There was no fighting it in earnest. Bodin might be able to anticipate its moves, but the creature could read him just as easily. That was how he’d received the scars down his face, after all.

Which meant it now knew how much he cared about Juniper. Its onyx eyes lifted to the woods behind Bodin.

“Go! Now. All of you,” Bodin demanded.

“No,” she said before the Ombrete let out another roar and charged—but not to get to Bodin, no. It wanted his wife, and they were in its way.

Samuel grunted at the impact, and Laurent stood closer to Bodin with his sword out. Bodin admired his bravery, but that blade wouldn’t protect him.

“Let me down!” June screamed. “Bo!”

He clenched his jaw while silently thanking whoever had grabbed her. She continued to cry as they carried her away, and it tore at his heart, but at least she would be safe.

“Bo?” Laurent said, his voice full of concern and confusion. His friend hadn’t inherited magic. Even after drinking the water from the lake as a child, none appeared in him. He couldn’t help here.

“You too. Get out of here.”

“I’m not just leaving you—”

“Yes, you are,” Bodin interrupted, blocking the monster again as it swiped a claw at him. “Both of you go. Protect her. And shut the godsdamned door behind you!”

Laurent’s footsteps retreated, but Samuel hesitated.

“Go. That’s an order,” Bodin said between clenched teeth. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple, despite the cool air here. When his guard still didn’t move, he added, “Please, Samuel.”

No one else was going to die by this monster. He wouldn’t allow it.

Bodin let out a sigh of relief when the man took off. But the feeling was brief. The Ombrete growled a beat before it launched itself skyward. It flew over Bodin toward the portal, and his heart stopped. He sprinted after it, throwing spirals of magic to knock it off course.

Managing to stop its trajectory, Bodin used his shadows to toss the creature aside. That wouldn’t deter it for long, but if Laurent could just get that door shut…

His lifelong friend reached safety but stood in the portal, waiting. Samuel entered just after. Bodin cursed them. “Shut it!”

Laurent refused, beckoning him to hurry with one hand while the other still held his sword. Not that it would do much good. Bodin took off and was nearly there when a ball of fire soared his way. He barely managed to dodge it.

He wasn’t as lucky the second time. Searing heat blasted into his left shoulder, and he fell to the decayed ground. Gritting his teeth, Bodin rolled over to protect himself from the monster as it came closer. Pain shot through his arm as he tried to lift it to use his power.

The Ombrete landed and stalked toward him, a predator focused on his prey.

“Shut the fucking door,” he whispered, hoping one of them would think clearly enough to follow the command. His life wasn’t worth all of theirs.

As the shadow creature paused, preparing to lunge, Bodin shook his head. This couldn’t happen. He wouldn’t die. No, his fate was much worse than that, it seemed. The darkness inside him began to shift, that final lock trying to break open to protect himself. If he unleashed it though, no one else would be safe. Pain shot through him, bones creaking, preparing to take a new form.

With a roar, the Ombrete jumped—

Only to be met with a wall of light.

He whipped his head around, expecting to find that his wife had somehow learned to use her Lumen magic. But it wasn’t her.

Richard stood above him, both hands raised at the beast. “Move. Now.”

Bodin managed to get to his feet through his shock and make it to the doorway. Shoving Laurent inside, he watched as Richard walked backward to them, his eyes never leaving the Ombrete. His magic never wavering. As soon as he reached the palace, Bodin slammed the door shut—both the physical portal and the one in his mind that threatened to burst open and ruin everything. His chest heaved with ragged breaths, from the pain, the exertion, and the anger alike. He didn’t even have the strength to lock the portal with his magic.

“Bo,” a shaky voice said. He hadn’t even realized he’d closed his eyes. Opening them, he found his wife being held back by her eldest brother.

Bodin was so mad at her. Infuriated beyond belief. Yet, seeing her here, safe… He took a single step toward her before she ripped out of Rafe’s grip

and barreled into Bodin, her arms wrapping around his middle.

"I'm sorry," she whispered against his chest. "I'm so sorry."

Sighing, he hugged her and pressed his lips to the top of her head. He breathed her in, holding her tightly, needing to feel that she was here and safe. "I know."

He looked up at the others, at Richard, specifically, who was squeezing his hands into fists before straightening them again. Over and over. The guard met Bodin's gaze then glanced down at Juniper with concern.

As if sensing his attention, she stiffened and turned around. "You…"

Laurent took a step closer to Richard, his hand on his sword. "You're Gilarnian."

Richard visibly swallowed and nodded.

"No," Juniper whispered. "That's not possible. You've worked for our family since before I was… born…"

Her words trailed off. Hugo's eyes widened, and he looked back and forth between his sister and her most trusted guard.

"It was my mother," she said under her breath.

Bodin had no idea what was going on. He was still in a great deal of pain and wanted to sit down, but whatever revelation his wife had come to seemed important, and he sensed that she was going to need him.

Except, Richard appeared just as confused. "What?"

Juniper lifted her chin. "You said you were once in love, but she married another man. Was it my mother?"

A weighted silence filled the room. Rafe's eyes widened as he glanced down at her hands, and the color leached out of Richard's face.

"How…" The older man took a step back, shaking his head.

"Someone please tell me what's happening," Laurent said.

Samuel shifted closer to Richard, one hand splayed at his side.

Juniper pivoted to look at Hugo then Bodin. "It's hereditary. You both said the only way it could be this strong is if it came from a parent or grandparent, right?"

All at once, it made sense. Bodin nodded. "Yes."

Tears lined her beautiful green eyes, and the only thing he wanted to do was scoop her up and take her away from all of this. But he knew he couldn't do that. She needed to face this. She needed these answers. Instead, he put a hand on her back and kissed her forehead once before turning her to face the man again.

“I’m here with you,” Bodin whispered, standing directly behind her.

“You have magic,” Richard said in an equally low voice.

No one spoke for several seconds. As if they were each waiting on Juniper’s reaction. Bodin’s head pounded, his shoulder throbbed from the burns, but he didn’t move. He would let her process this as long as she needed.

Then, he would find out why she came down here. And how she found the godsforsaken key to begin with. He knew he should have thrown it into one of the rivers, but he hadn’t been able to bring himself to do it. It served as a reminder, as well as his punishment.

“This is too much.” Juniper shook her head. “I… I can’t…”

Before anyone could say more, she was pulling out of his grasp and heading up the stairs. The group of men stared at each other for a moment, seemingly unsure of what to do in this situation. Gritting his teeth, Bodin quickly summoned enough of his magic to seal the door. He’d busted the lock to get it open earlier, to get to her, and he knew he would need to reforge one, but he wanted to make sure Juniper was all right first. Richard started to go after her, but Laurent and Samuel blocked his path.

“Hugo,” Bodin said, “since you seem to understand the situation, please fill Richard in. Laurent, explain the Ombrete. I trust them with this.” Pausing at the foot of the stairs, he turned to add, “Thank you for… I don’t know what would have happened if we hadn’t made it to her in time. I don’t think I…” He cleared his throat, unable to finish the thought. “I trust you with this information, but it cannot leave this room under any circumstance.”

“Of course,” Rafe said as the others nodded their agreement. Richard dipped his head, appearing distraught, and Bodin knew it was more than guilt weighing the man down. Yes, he had been charged with Juniper’s safety, but she’d run away from him again. That wasn’t his fault. But it was more than that. There was also fear in his hazel-green eyes.

This man who’d always protected Juniper. From the moment Bodin met them, he’d seen how much Richard cared for her. And he hadn’t known this monumental secret. He’d missed it. Now, they were both in a kingdom where their magic was forbidden.

“I trust him, Gilarnian or not,” Bodin told Laurent.

Samuel stepped forward. “Sire, there’s more to this than you know.”

“What do you mean?” His guard so rarely spoke up or inserted himself, so if he was doing so now, it must have been important.

Glancing at Richard, Samuel said, “I think you should talk to the queen before blindly trusting him. She was questioning things earlier, but I think you should hear it from her.”

Richard visibly clenched his jaw. He looked up the stairs, but there wasn’t anger in his eyes. He wanted to go after Juniper, that much was clear. Bodin sincerely thought it was because he cared though. He wanted to protect her, talk through this.

Bodin nodded. “Stay with him, then. But he’s not a prisoner. I will find out what’s going on.” To Richard, he added, “I’ll keep her safe. I promise.”

Richard let out a breath. As Bodin turned to go, he said in a hushed tone, “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Bodin raced up the stairs and through the art gallery. Juniper was nowhere in sight, so he made his way toward their bedroom. His shoulder was killing him. He wondered if Richard had healing powers with that light. He should have asked him before rushing away, but he needed to find his wife.

Just as he’d suspected, he found her in their rooms, sitting sideways on the bench in front of one of the large open windows. She continued staring out at the darkening horizon as he took a seat next to her feet.

When she still didn’t acknowledge him, he leaned over to brush the hair from her face, as well as the tears. “Where’s the key?”

She opened her hand to reveal the iron key. Shaking his head, he took it and shoved it into his pocket. He still wasn’t sure what to say, which topic to address first.

“I think I dropped the dagger,” she whispered. “I had it when it attacked, but when Hugo threw me over his shoulder, it must have fallen. I’m s-so sorry.”

He inhaled slowly then gripped her chin so she would look at him. “You’re safe; that’s what matters.”

“But it was your mother’s.”

“You are far more important, Sunshine.”

“I’m sorry,” she repeated, pulling back to turn her head away again. “For going in there.”

His relief of her being safe faded, his anger returning in full force. “Why, June? Why would you do it after I specifically told you not to?”

More tears appeared, and though he hated seeing her upset, he wouldn't give in to the urge to comfort her just yet. Juniper whispered, "I… I don't have a good reason. I was so curious, and when I stumbled across the key, I couldn't stop thinking about it. It was like a force beyond myself was urging me to go see." When he opened his mouth, she said, "I know that sounds absurd, but it's the truth. It compelled me forward; I didn't have full control."

He swallowed, understanding exactly what she meant. But surely it wasn't the same…

Horror crashed through him. "You think the monster led you there?"

"No." She shook her head. "I think Ronna did. I just don't know why."

Sighing, he scrubbed a hand down his face. One thing at a time. "You knew there was a reason I kept it locked, why no one can know what's in there. Why… How did you even find the key?"

"I was searching for information about the war. I wanted to try to find something that could help stop it." Fear laced her words that churned his gut, but there was more there that he couldn't name. She got up and went to the chest at the end of their bed. When she pulled out his journal, he wasn't nearly as upset as he should have been. It was an invasion of privacy, yes, but there wasn't anything else in there that he wanted to hide from her. She held it up in front of her and said, "But I read about the monster you trapped, and I couldn't help but think…"

"What?" He stood and tried to step closer, but she moved backward. The fear wasn't just of the Ombrete. She was afraid of him.

"You said in here that it was beyond powerful, near unstoppable."

His brows furrowed. "So, you wanted to test that out for yourself?"

"No." She groaned. "But I thought maybe if we could figure out how to control it, we could use it to win this war."

Bodin swallowed. It wasn't the first time he'd heard that theory. Laurent had voiced the idea more than once. From their perspectives, he understood how it could seem like a possibility, but it wasn't. "There is no controlling the Ombrete, love."

"Ombrete?"

"The shadow monster."

She set the journal on the bed and moved a few steps closer. "I was just trying to find a way to help."

"And I love you for that, but this isn't the way. I promise."

“But—”

“No, June.” Then, it struck him. She didn’t understand. She didn’t see the truth. “How much of the journal did you read?”

She fidgeted with the ends of her sleeves. Even amid the frustration, he couldn’t help but appreciate how beautiful she was.

“I wasn’t trying to snoop or invade your privacy. I skipped the more… personal stuff in the beginning, but I read most of it.” She must have seen something in his face because her voice grew quiet by the end of the sentence. “I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t have—”

Bodin lifted a hand and shook his head. “No, stop. I… that monster…”

“What?”

Running a hand through his dirty hair, he returned to the window seat. Had it not been clear in the journal? He had scribbled out a lot of it in anger, but he thought if she read it, she would have known the truth. “Do you remember what I told you about the portals? About how they work?”

“You create the places with your mind and magic.” She crossed her arms. “And the journal said you made them after trapping the Ombrete in one.”

He didn’t want to do this. He didn’t want to have this conversation. The moment she knew the truth, it would change everything. He’d hoped he would never need to tell her. “And why did I trap it? Where did it come from?”

Her gaze softened. “It made its way into the palace and killed your family.”

“Before that?”

“It attacked in the woods while you and Beatrice were traveling. That part was confusing though. Your thoughts seemed incomplete or scattered, and it was hard to follow a lot of it.” She looked from him to the journal and back. “Bo, where did it come from? Do you know?”

“I told you. Everything in the portal lands came from my mind.”

Juniper’s face scrunched up as she tried to piece the information together. He could see her thinking through it, still not quite adding it up. When she put a hand up over her mouth with a gasp, he clenched his fists.

“It came from your mind?” she whispered. “But how? That doesn’t make sense…” She shook her head, choking on her words. “What caused that much pain that you needed to create that?”

That was when he realized what else he was seeing in her eyes, beyond the fear. It was heartbreak. *For him*.

She hadn't figured it out. He was going to have to say it. The words he couldn't even fully write because it made him sick.

"Juniper, I didn't just *create* it." He swallowed. "I *am* the monster. It's a part of me. I am exactly what everyone thinks."

THIRTY

Bodin

6 YEARS EARLIER…

Ronna thought she knew pain, but it was nothing compared to the loss of her brother. It tore away a piece of her very essence. But it also gave her something she never expected. Immense power to punish the one who hurt her.

Beatrice rambled about her findings in the market as Bodin stared out the window. She'd been talking nonstop since they left Terian. After about an hour, he quit listening. He watched the trees in passing, the sunlight flickering down between the branches heavy with green leaves.

"Bodin?"

He looked at his wife, who shook her head in the exasperated way she tended to do only toward him.

"You haven't heard a word I've said, have you?"

Guilt wracked him. They might not love each other, but she didn't deserve to be ignored. Clearing his throat, he moved to sit on her side of the carriage and took her hand. "Forgive me. I've been preoccupied."

"By what?" She leaned her head on his shoulder, and he was grateful that, in the end, he'd at least gained a friend in this arrangement.

"The war. My father's choice to send so many men to the front lines and leave our villages unprotected." The fighting had begun nearly a decade ago, and while it started small, it had grown with each passing year. "The fact that we can't…"

Beatrice squeezed his hand. They'd been married for over a year now and still hadn't been able to produce an heir, despite trying as often as they could. In a kingdom plagued by war, where anything could happen, that was more important than ever. Yet, he failed with every attempt. And he struggled to understand why when he and Camille had conceived so quickly.

But the thought of succeeding also terrified him. Every time they discussed it or she thought she might have been pregnant finally, memories of Camille haunted him. The blood and screaming… He couldn't go through that again. He couldn't lose another wife and child.

"It'll happen," she whispered. "I spoke to one of the healers in Terian, and she gave me a tonic to take. It is supposed to help."

He focused on her again and kissed the top of her head. "I didn't know you were doing that today."

"I didn't want to make a big deal out of it. I was going to take it without telling you so that if it didn't work… you wouldn't be angry."

Bodin sighed and released her hand to drape an arm around her shoulders, hugging her close. He opened his mouth to tell her he would never be angry with her for something like that—he knew it was beyond their control—but the carriage jerked to a halt. Shouts rang out, followed quickly by the sound of clanging swords.

He pushed aside the curtain in the window, hand already on the pommel of his sword. One of his guards stepped in front of the door, and Bodin asked, "What's going on?"

"Highwaymen, Your Highness. Stay inside until we've cleared the—"

The man's words cut off as an arrow pierced his throat.

Beatrice let out a shriek, and Bodin whipped around to cover her mouth. He all but shoved her off of the bench to duck down on the floor. "Stay here. Do not come out until I tell you it's safe. Here, take this extra dagger."

She nodded and grabbed it with a trembling hand, fumbling with it. "Please don't leave me."

"I'll be right outside this door," he said as more men yelled in pain. "I need to help them."

"Be careful."

Bodin nodded and pressed a soft kiss to her cheek before slipping out of the carriage. He unsheathed his sword in the same breath and looked around at the mayhem. It was chaos. His well-trained men were dying around him.

Taking a deep breath, he stood with his blade held high.

One of the highwaymen charged, and Bodin easily twisted out of his path. Stabbing the man, he moved on to the next, working his way to where the majority of the fighting was taking place. There were at least two dozen against his handful of guards.

Bodin darted left and right, striking as fast as he could in his attempt to take out as many thieves as possible. He used his shadow magic and extra strength to fight back, but many of his men didn't have magic. And they were completely surrounded and outnumbered. He couldn't fight every one of them by himself.

A scream ripped through the commotion, and he whirled around to find Beatrice being dragged out of the carriage.

"No!" Bodin tried to reach her, but with each attempt, he was thwarted.

"Stop," the man who held her yelled. When the fighting continued, he pulled up the same dagger Bodin had given his wife and pressed it to her throat.

Bodin stilled. To his guards, he shouted, "Stop!"

It took a moment, but they obeyed. Each was grabbed by the criminals except for Bodin.

"Ah, the prince." The man smirked. "I thought it was a royal carriage, but I didn't think the sole heir would be foolish enough to travel with so few to protect him."

"Let her go." Bodin put his hands out to his sides, showing he wouldn't fight. "Take me instead."

"Jasper," he said, nodding for one of his friends to move closer. He then pushed Beatrice into his arms. "Hold her while I negotiate with His Highness."

"My pleasure." Even his voice was slimy. Jasper's malicious grin made Bodin sick. Beatrice gasped as he gripped her hip and pulled her back against his chest. She struggled, pushing to get away, but that only put more determination in his eyes. With one hand around her throat and his other arm across her stomach, he whispered something that made her whimper and stop moving.

Bodin's blood boiled. "I said, let her go."

The man seemingly in charge raised a brow. "What could possibly make you think you have any power to give commands in this scenario?"

Shadows swirled around his hands, but he didn't know how to use his magic without her getting hurt. Could he move faster than the man holding her? Faster than the man who could snap her neck in an instant? The leader looked down at Bodin's hands and shook his head in disapproval. Glancing behind Bodin, he inclined his head.

Bodin turned just in time to see blades slice the throats of two of his remaining guards. "No!"

"Now, here's how this is going to work," the leader said, ignoring him. "I am going to keep killing them until you cooperate, and you should know, more than one of my men have magic too. If you still don't do as I say, I will drag out the last of their deaths in front of you in the most agonizing way I can think of. And if that *still* doesn't convince you, just imagine what I'll do to your dear wife, here."

Bodin faced him once more, nauseated. "What do you want? We don't have much with us, but if it's riches you want, take it and go."

"We have no use for your coins, Prince."

He looked around at the different men. The leader said they had magic too, but not what kind. Bodin swallowed. "You're Gilarnian…"

The man made a disgusted noise then spit on the ground. "Don't you dare compare us to those heathens."

Any miniscule hope Bodin was hanging on to vanished. "Umbra."

"Good, you've heard of us," the leader said with a smirk. "That makes this easier."

Bodin shook his head, not understanding. If the rebels wanted to cause more strife between the two kingdoms, killing Bodin and making it look like a Gilarnian attack would be their best bet. But he didn't need to know who they were for that to happen. A sinking feeling overcame him. "What do you want?"

"Damien."

"What do you want, *Damien*?" he snarled.

"This war to end by means of conquering Gilarn, once and for all."

Bodin almost laughed. Was this man serious? If it were that simple, someone in the last thousand years would have accomplished it by now. "And how do you propose we do that?"

"We want your father to order all citizens over fourteen to go to the valley if they are physically able," Damien said. "And I want him to make

an arrangement with Forosse to get their army too. They will sail to the western shores of Gilarn so that we may attack from both angles."

"I… I can't do that." Not only because his father wouldn't listen to him, but also, it went against everything Bodin believed in.

"Wrong answer." Damien nodded, and the thump of another body hitting the ground sounded behind Bodin. "You're running out of men."

"You don't understand," he tried, but the man shook his head.

Damien stepped closer, running a hand through his thick black hair. "No, I think it's you who doesn't understand. We got the war started, and now, we're going to win it."

Bodin couldn't breathe. "What are you talking about?" he managed to whisper.

"The dagger was really meant for you, you know." Damien lifted the blade he'd been holding against Beatrice's throat. He twirled and flipped it around, like he didn't have a care in the world. It wasn't the same one, of course, but Bodin didn't need to ask what he meant.

Knees growing weak, Bodin fell to the hard dirt. Overwhelming grief consumed him. Flashes of his brother's smile filled his mind, echoes of his laughter ringing in his ears. The assassin had confessed to being from Gilarn, but something about it had always seemed off to Bodin. Like he'd given in too easily and told them what they wanted to hear.

Because it wasn't true.

The king had set out on a mission to avenge his son, blaming an innocent kingdom. Thousands of soldiers from both sides had died because of Umbra's actions. Because they killed Bodin's little brother, their prince, for their own gain.

He hung his head low, leaning forward to brace himself on both hands, not caring when tears dripped onto the ground beneath him. His shadows tumbled across the dry grass. An invisible band gripped his chest tightly, squeezing his lungs and heart. Pain ricocheted through his temples.

Damien sighed. "Fine, let's start with the princess instead. Maybe that will motivate you more."

Beatrice sobbed, and Bodin raised his head. Another man moved closer to her, running a finger down her cheek.

"Don't touch her," Bodin growled. That same pressure increased, making it hard to breath, the lack of air making him dizzy, but still, he focused on his wife.

“I’m going to make you watch as we have a little fun, give her a reason to scream.” The man in charge got in his face. “Then, we’ll come back to this conversation to see if you’ve changed your mind.”

“If you hurt her, I swear—”

The man backhanded him and headed toward Beatrice. “We’ll send you on your way to talk to the king, and once the decrees are made, you can have her back. Sound like a deal?”

Bodin’s vision darkened around the edges.

“Please don’t,” Beatrice begged. “Please don’t do this.”

Bodin’s magic pulsed through his veins, begging for a release. Along with a new sensation burning inside him. The pressure continued to build in his chest, as if something was trying to burst out of him. With her next scream, darkness covered him. Shadows spread around him, rolling like fog across the forest floor. He’d always had strong magic, but nothing like this. Fear gripped him at this unknown.

Between one breath and the next, that brewing rage inside took over. His body ripped apart, shifting into a new form. Bones shattering to bend in different directions, his skin peeling away. He yelled in agony, but what came out of his mouth wasn’t sound.

It was fire.

Wings flapped, and suddenly, he was in the air. He torched the rebels, the evil men who’d threatened him and his wife. Who’d worked with those who killed his brother. Who’d planned it.

But he didn’t stop there.

He couldn’t.

Everything was ablaze, and he tasted iron and copper as he tore into the screaming men. He couldn’t even tell who he was attacking at this point. None of it mattered. Nothing outside of his fury. He would destroy everything. Or rather, the creature he’d become would.

It’s all mine now, it whispered in his head, pushing Bodin to the back.

It had fully taken control. And try as he might, Bodin couldn’t stop it. He shouted in his mind to cease, but it did no good. He watched as if trapped in a prison while he killed and maimed.

Until the screams ended. Until there wasn’t a soul left alive in that clearing. Not. One.

Apart from the crackling flames, the only thing he heard was his own sobbing in his head as the grief and guilt consumed him.

But then, the monster flew toward the castle, wanting more blood.

Bodin thought that he'd known fear until that moment. He begged and pleaded to no avail.

After witnessing the deaths of so many more, Bodin gave up. He gave in to the darkness, wanting it to consume him if that meant not seeing anything else. If it meant forgetting he'd killed his wife, his parents, and so many of his people.

He no longer wanted to exist in this world with so much tragedy.

So, he let the monster have free rein and tried to disappear.

THIRTY-ONE

Juniper

PRESENT DAY...

With her power, Ronna found the strength to fight Theran. But when she went to attack, she realized he wasn't stopping her. He knelt beside his twin with a look of horror before glancing up at her and asking, "What have I done?"

Pain.

There was so much pain in Bodin's eyes that Juniper could feel it herself. He had stood and started pacing at some point during his recounting of that horrible day, but now he returned to the window seat and slumped down, the weight of his past sitting on his shoulders. She didn't know what to do, how to help.

"I didn't truly understand what had happened until days later," he whispered, lowering his chin and his gaze, seemingly unable to look at her. "The story is that a creature attacked us in the woods and I was the only survivor… but that's not the truth." And then, so quietly she almost missed it, he said, "It was me. I'm the monster."

His story twisted her stomach into knots. How was this possible?

"Umbra killed Elias," she whispered, now understanding why he'd written that name in the journal so much. "They started this."

"Yes." He took a deep breath. "The ones who attacked Beatrice and I were the vilest type of men, threatening her and killing my men just to get to me. As if murdering my little brother wasn't enough." He pushed to his feet and crossed the room to the drink cart. After pouring and downing a

glass of bourbon, he faced her once more. Crossing his arms, he said, “I lost control of my magic. I unleashed it on them, wanting to destroy every last one, even though I had no idea what I was doing.”

“And you killed her too.”

The words were barely more than a breath, but even from across the room, he seemed to hear her. He visibly swallowed, looked down at the floor, and nodded once. “I didn’t mean to… I didn’t know… That creature isn’t just something I created out of grief, Juniper. It’s a part of me.”

Her heart beat too fast. Shaking her head, she tried to figure out what to say. Fear coursed through her at what this could mean, but more than that was a great sadness. For him. For the suffering he’d lived through. “Only Laurent knew?”

Nodding, he said, “By some gods-blessed miracle, he hadn’t been with us while traveling that day.”

Bodin had been hiding this terrible secret for so long. Just like she’d kept her own. One cautious step at a time, she moved closer to him. To the husband she hadn’t initially wanted. To the man who’d tried to push her away because he didn’t want to hurt another person. His first wife died while giving birth to his child. The second was killed in his attempt to save her.

No wonder he hadn’t wanted to open up his heart again.

“You came to the palace,” she whispered.

“Apparently, I terrorized a few villages first. I don’t remember chunks of that time. It’s hard to explain, but it’s like I was stuck inside the demon creature. It was in control, and I think… I think after the first attack, I lost consciousness for a while. It’s me, but it’s not. It has a mind of its own; it taunted me, telling me it was all his now. It was torture. And then, it got worse. I made it home…”

Where he killed the last of his family.

By most accounts, Juniper should be terrified of him. Yet, her heart refused to listen to logic. “How did you change back? How did you trap it?”

He got up from the window seat again and moved to sit on the edge of their bed closer to her. “It seemed impossible to shift back. I begged and pleaded with the creature, with the gods, but I couldn’t regain control. I had to watch as I…” He cleared his throat. “And here’s the thing. I was trapped in my mind, but he was there too. He did a good job shielding most of his thoughts, but not all of them. I saw pieces of how we merged.”

Juniper slowly closed the final distance between them, needing to hear more, but dreading it at the same time.

"The creature was once a powerful being, but it was cursed into the shadows. It didn't have a physical form anymore, and so, it wandered, searching for a host to use. For thousands of years, it sought out a human strong enough to… invade." Bodin sighed. "It latched on to me during a vulnerable moment. It used my desperation for power, and it took *everything*."

"Bo," she whispered.

He shook his head and continued. "After the attacks, it grew tired. It wasn't used to a physical body. I woke up days later in the forest, naked and covered in blood. I'm still not entirely sure how I returned to myself, but I think it was just too exhausting to keep ahold of that control. Laurent was the one who found me—guards and townspeople had started searching when they realized I was missing. I immediately told him the truth and wanted him to…"

When he trailed off, Juniper closed the remaining distance to him.

"I couldn't let it happen again," he said, lowering his voice. "So, I told him to do whatever it took to stop me. I wanted him to end my life."

"Bodin." Horror flooded through her. She had no idea his thoughts had been *that* dark. Her vision blurred with tears.

"He refused, obviously," Bodin said. "In the end, I asked him to at least lock me up because I feared the beast would return and kill him too. And we didn't understand it, so he agreed and took me to the old, unused prison cells. And while I was locked in there, I was trying to figure out how to get whatever this was out of me. I began experimenting with my magic, and eventually, I discovered I could create… realistic scenes or illusions."

Juniper's mind reeled as she followed the conversation. It was surreal. She leaned a hip against the bed beside him, not quite touching. Not yet.

"I couldn't make whole worlds, just a small portion of one contained within that room, but then I realized I could make it stay permanently—and more importantly, I could put anything from my mind into them." He scratched the back of his neck then winced, reminding her of the fire that burned his shoulder. "Including the Ombrete."

"You trapped it in there," she whispered as she finally moved that last little step that remained between them, close enough to remove his shirt.

When she raised her hands to reach for him, he gently grasped her wrists, watching her face for something—fear, maybe? But when she showed none, he relaxed, releasing her, and continued.

"No." He shook his head. "Not really. I had Laurent let me out, and then I tried to create a scene from beyond the room. I could, but I had to be touching the door to help solidify it and contain it to that space. Once I figured that out, I imagined that creature." He sucked in a breath when she peeled the charred fabric from his shoulder. "I created a replica, putting everything I'd felt during that time behind the door. And as soon as I locked it, leaving the monster in there, I no longer felt it threatening to reappear."

She stilled, her eyebrows dipping down. "That got rid of it? How if it's actually a part of you?"

"It isn't completely gone," he said while she went to her vanity to search for something to soothe his burn; she could feel him watching her the entire time. "It's still there, but it's like it is no longer living just beneath the surface. It allowed me to go back to my life without worrying every minute of every day that I would unleash it again. It felt contained—*feels* contained—but I think I could still call it forth in the right circumstances."

Juniper returned with a small tin of cold cream. She motioned for him to turn, and he angled his back toward her, pulling one knee up onto the bed. As gently as she could, she spread the salve across his red, blistered skin. Once it was covered, she set the tin on the bedside table and wiped her hand on his ruined shirt before tossing it to the floor.

"I even went into the room once to try to fight that version." He pointed to the scars slicing down the right side of his face. "I thought, maybe if I killed it there, it would die in my mind too… I was willing to try anything."

She reached up to trace one of the faint pink lines that stretched from his forehead to his jaw.

"When you went inside, June," Bodin continued. "The connection returned in full force. Even from Tusan, I felt you. And the real one woke within me. It wanted out; it nearly took over again."

"But you fought it?" she breathed.

"I had no choice. I knew I had to get back to you, and that was stronger than the need to shift." He turned to lower his leg once more.

She sighed, wondering how it was possible she'd ended up with this man. "I was so scared you would never know what happened. That I would never get to tell you…"

“What?” he asked when she trailed off.

Wetting her lips, she watched as his eyes followed the quick movement of her tongue. She ignored the heat in her cheeks, in her core. “I love you.”

He stared at her in disbelief for several heartbeats before whispering, “How can you say that? I’m a monster. I’ve killed almost everyone I’ve ever loved.”

She placed a surprisingly steady palm against his cheek, right over his scars, forcing him to look at her. “You are *not* a monster, Bo. The power to turn into that creature does not define you.”

“But—”

“No.” She took a final step, so she was pressed against him, standing between his legs. “When sneaking through Nortussa, I saw vicious people who cared only for themselves and took what they wanted. Even my father was a cruel man who locked up his daughter, claiming it was for her protection but then threatened her every time her brother tried to fight for her freedom, and then sold her off at his earliest convenience. I’ve known demons in my life, Bodin, and I promise that you are *nothing* like them. You care more about your friends, your people, than yourself. You have the biggest heart of anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Juniper,” he whispered, his dark eyes glassy. One of his hands went to the nape of her neck. “I don’t deserve you.”

She shook her head. “I’m pretty sure we were made for one another. Your dark magic, my light… We balance each other out.”

Finally—*finally*—the corner of his mouth curved up and he let out a huff of breath. But the amusement vanished just as quickly. “You should be terrified of me.”

“Do you remember what you did when you found out about my magic?” She stood on her toes, bringing their mouths closer together.

His free hand slid around to her back. “I was horrible to you, threw a fit, and then avoided you all day.”

Juniper scoffed and rolled her eyes. “After that.”

The light returned to his gaze little by little, erasing the darkness that had nothing to do with the color of his irises. “I took you to bed.”

“*Bodin*.”

With a soft chuckle, he brushed his thumb across her cheek. “I told you that I trusted you.”

“So, why wouldn’t I trust you the same way?”

“Because it’s not the same. You never killed anyone with your secret.”

Her brow furrowed. “Neither did you, by the sounds of it. You weren’t in control. You didn’t *choose* to kill anyone. None of them died by *your* hands.”

“June,” he whispered, leaning in to press a soft kiss to her lips. After a moment, he added, “When I felt you there, I was terrified I would lose you too.”

“I’m so sorry; that wasn’t my intention. I didn’t even think about you feeling it until I was already inside. I would never want to do that to you on purpose.” She twisted her arms behind his head and hugged him with everything she had. He didn’t hesitate to hold her just as tightly. She breathed in his familiar scent, soaking in his touch. She’d missed him so much. “How did you get back here so quickly?”

Rubbing her back, he said, “Tusan is less than a day’s ride away. I practically stole a horse and left the moment I felt you go into the portal and then rode the whole way here without stopping.”

“And my brothers?”

“Refused to let me come alone. They didn’t know what was going on, just that something was wrong and I needed to return.” With his face buried against the side of her neck, he whispered, “I love you too, you know.”

Juniper leaned back to kiss him again. Tears fell from her eyes as her husband held her. For the first time in over a decade, she didn’t question that love. She felt it deep in her soul, this connection between them.

Except, even as she thought about not questioning it, she realized this wasn’t the first time. Because there had always been another person there for her—apart from her brothers. The one who’d never left her, even when everyone else had. The man she’d always looked up to, cared for, and shared secrets with. All but one. She kept her magic from Richard not because she feared him, but because she didn’t want him to fear *her*. She didn’t want another person to avoid her because of it. Though, she now knew no one feared her really. It was the implication, the reasoning behind the magic, that caused so much strife.

She had always thought of him more as a father figure than a guard. And just yesterday—gods above, it had only been a day ago—he told her she was his family. Now, she wondered if he knew the truth of those words.

Despite his unwavering love and loyalty though, she had doubted him. She hadn’t outright accused him of being involved with Elias’s death, but

she'd implied it. She had yelled at him and then ran off without giving him a chance to explain.

Breaking the kiss, she asked Bodin, "How long do you think we have before Richard comes looking for me?"

He gave her a sad, understanding smile. "If I had to guess, I'd say he's likely already waiting outside the door."

With a sigh, she leaned to rest her forehead on his uninjured shoulder. Bodin continued to hold her, letting her stand there for as long as she needed. She had to face this, had to ask the questions that would hurt. For a moment though, she simply stood in her husband's arms, thanking the goddess that they were both safe. Then, she whispered, "He's my real father. But there's more you should know."

THIRTY-TWO

Bodin

Theran's guilt wasn't enough. Ronna wanted him to pay, to feel the agony she had endured for so long because of him. Realizing how strong her wrath was, Theran pleaded for mercy, but she would not hear it.

After putting on a fresh tunic, Bodin held out a hand in offering—and even after the conversation they'd just had, their confessions of love for each other, he was still afraid that she wouldn't take it. A second passed, but then, to his immense relief, Juniper took it, entwining their fingers with a nod. He didn't fight the small smile tugging on his lips. Bringing his other palm to her cheek, he leaned down to kiss her before heading toward the bedroom door so they could find Richard.

He'd missed this place, but more than anything, he'd missed June. They might not have known each other for long, but it seemed that even a week away from her was too much.

He didn't know how to respond to her trust in him. To have someone accept this side of him without question meant everything.

But he did know for certain that he would stand by her side as she faced this next challenge. She said she needed to share something with him, but she also admitted that she wanted to talk to Richard first. Bodin hadn't argued, just stood to leave and held out his hand, letting her know without words that he was with her.

She paused at the door, and he could practically see the questions swirling in her eyes. “Things don’t add up, but before I tell you and cause you to want to kill him,” she whispered, “I want to hear his side.”

“You think I’d want to kill him?”

“I think if I told you the pieces of what I remember, you would jump to the same conclusion I did.” She put her free hand on his chest. “We both deserve the truth, and while I love you so much it terrifies me, you have been known to lose your temper and storm off without listening.”

“You’re never going to let that go, are you?”

She raised one brow. “Nope.”

“That’s fair.” Bodin tilted her chin up to brush another kiss against the corner of her mouth. “No more stalling. Talk to your… Richard. I’m right here with you. As long as you want me.”

“Forever,” she said with such confidence that he wanted to lock the door and carry her back to their bed.

He’d only had a single night with her over a week ago, a single taste of what their life could be together. It wasn’t enough. He wanted so much more. “Not even death will keep me from spending the rest of eternity with you. As long as I am breathing, I will be at your side, and then I will find you again in whatever comes next for us.”

Juniper sighed, leaning into his hand as he cupped her cheek once more. “I love you.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of hearing that.” He brushed a piece of her hair behind one ear. “I love you too, Sunshine.” They had cleaned up a little when changing clothes after their talk, but they were still filthy and exhausted. It was nearing sunrise, but she needed to talk to Richard before they went to bed. Then, when they woke, he would have the tub filled for them to share. He had loved his first wife—she’d been one of his closest friends growing up—and he’d cared about the second, but nothing compared to what he felt for Juniper. And he intended to ensure she knew that.

When her skin began to glow, he smiled in earnest. “Maybe I should have him come in here to chat?”

Startled, she looked down at her body. It wasn’t as intense as he’d seen it before, but it was still very obvious that this was more than just a faint sheen on her arms and face. She grimaced. “I didn’t want to just show him the moment I saw him.”

“Perhaps it’s for the best? Get it out there quickly,” Bodin said. “Besides… I may have told Hugo to fill him in while I came after you.”

Juniper narrowed her eyes. With her annoyance, the glow dimmed. He grabbed her, hauling her into his arms, and kissed her hard. She only hesitated a moment before parting her lips. His tongue brushed hers as he pushed her back against the door. She moaned into his mouth. As he kissed down her jaw to her neck, she whispered, “Stop. We can’t right now. I need to—”

A gasp escaped her as he pressed his leg between her thighs.

Grinding against him, she moaned his name. “*Bodin*.”

He opened his eyes. Satisfied it had worked, he released her, stepped back, and adjusted his pants. She looked at him in confusion until he glanced down with a nod.

“Seriously?” she yelled, pushing off of the door and practically stomping her foot. “You did that just to make me fucking glow?”

“I missed that filthy mouth.” Bodin couldn’t help but chuckle. “I can’t wait to have it around me later.”

She scowled and playfully smacked his chest, which only made his grin widen. Especially as her cheeks blushed through the soft white glow.

“That wasn’t the only reason,” he said with a shrug. “I’ve been thinking about doing that since the moment I left.”

“How about you just don’t leave again?” Juniper’s frown morphed into a smile, but it fell when he didn’t respond immediately. Taking a deep breath, she asked, “When?”

“Let’s discuss it later. Right now, we need to bring in Richard to see your Lumen magic and to have a bigger conversation.”

She nodded, but he could tell she hated it. He did too. He wished he never had to leave her, but they were in the middle of a war. And losing. If he didn’t figure out a way to even the battlefield, they would lose. He didn’t know what would happen then, but he was pretty sure it wouldn’t end well for him, his wife, or their friends.

Kissing her forehead, he moved around her to open the door a fraction. Sure enough, the guard stood just outside, with Samuel right beside him. Richard lifted his head the second it opened, looking more disheveled than he’d ever seen the man—even after his charge had disappeared on him. “Please let me speak to her.”

Bodin stepped aside, motioning for him to enter. He gave Samuel an appreciative nod, briefly wondering if he should also let the man in since he'd already been so involved.

Behind him, Richard cursed under his breath.

"I'll wait out here unless you need me," Samuel said, seeming to sense his dilemma.

"Thank you," Bodin said. "For everything."

He shut the door again and turned to find Juniper, where she stood in all her glowing wonder, arms crossed as she stared at the man who'd always protected her. Bodin went to her, hovering at her back in silent support, something he would always give her.

"Juniper," Richard whispered. "You… You're…"

Her light began to fade, even as she nodded.

"This is why they hid you away?"

Another nod.

The man visibly swallowed. He seemed to consider his next move. When he stepped toward them with an outstretched hand that started to glow, she expelled a breath and reached for it with her own. Richard pulled her into a hug.

"I… I didn't know," he said. "And I swear to you, I was not involved that day."

"I'm sorry for not listening," she said quietly. "Everything was just so overwhelming earlier, and I took it out on you because…"

"Because you know deep down that I'll still love you. Even after you throw a tantrum."

As she let out a breathy laugh and sniffled, Bodin went to sit in an armchair near the empty hearth. He had no idea what day they were talking about, but he'd wait for an explanation. They eventually followed and lowered onto the adjacent settee, side by side.

"I have loved your mother for most of my life," Richard started, keeping one arm around Juniper, seemingly unable, or not wanting, to separate from the girl he'd always loved and now knew was his daughter. "When the king announced he was going to take a new wife and had his sights set on her, we were devastated, but her parents agreed, and as you know, it's difficult to tell your—the king no."

Your father, he hadn't said. Bodin could see it in his eyes.

“We said our goodbyes, she got married and had Hugo, and then I was stationed at the palace as a royal guard. I was sent to protect her and her new son, and our reunion was difficult to handle.”

“She had an affair,” June whispered, staring at the fireplace.

Richard nodded. “When your mother told me she was pregnant with you, we wondered if…” He cleared his throat. “But after your birth, she confirmed you were the king’s daughter, and then she had me relocated to guard duty in another village. She said questioning whose baby she was carrying was one of the most terrifying times in her life. She couldn’t sneak around anymore because she feared what the king would do if he found out; she had to prioritize her children. Not just you and Hugo but your older brothers too, who had already lost one mother.

“It wasn’t until you were four that she sent word, asking me to return.” He placed a hand on hers. “She said she didn’t trust anyone to look after her most treasured possession. I didn’t learn she meant you until I arrived.”

Juniper lowered her gaze to her lap, and Bodin’s heart broke for her. She had told him during one of their late-night chats about how her mother used to always be with her but had distanced herself in the last decade. June rarely saw her in that time, and she’d said that hurt worse than being sent to live in that tower. It infuriated Bodin on her behalf.

He knew finding out about Richard was a monumental discovery, that it had shaken her to her core, but he was glad for it all the same. She deserved to have a family who loved her unconditionally. And he knew without a doubt that Richard did. He had, even before this revelation.

“So, why weren’t you there that day?” she asked, finally glancing up.

She looked so young in that moment, sitting beside her father, waiting for answers. Bodin could see their resemblance as they sat like this, but only because he was searching. It was subtle. They both had green eyes, but the hue was slightly off. Their blond hair was a different shade. But their mannerisms were almost… identical. The way June chewed on her lower lip while he seemed to bite the inside of his cheek, and how they both held themselves.

“Because I’m a man, and I made a grave mistake,” Richard whispered. Then, he met Bodin’s gaze. “I was here when the royal family of Forosse came to visit fifteen years ago.” He took a deep breath, but Bodin could already see where he was going with this. Everything made sense now—

June’s behavior and what she told him earlier. “I was supposed to be with her the day Prince Elias was killed.”

THIRTY-THREE

Bodin

Ronna cursed her brother into the shadows. He would live among that which he'd fought for so long, trapped there for an eternity. For generations, the story changed and grew more elaborate until no one knew for certain what it would take to break the curse.

Bodin clenched his jaw and fists. His shoulders tensed. He inhaled through his nose, trying to stay calm. Juniper turned her attention to him, and it was her presence, the fear in her eyes, that had Bodin nodding and telling the man to continue, taking another deep breath for good measure.

"The queen has always been extra protective of Juniper," Richard said. "When we came to visit, she insisted that one of her trusted maids pretend Juni was her daughter to keep her true identity a secret. And then, she had me act as part of the staff as well to stay with them without being suspicious. The maid and I thought it… a bit much, but in the end, we agreed.

"Except, the princess liked to make a game out of running from me and the other guards. And she kept doing so here to explore the palace. As it turns out, your brother liked to do the same, and it led to the two of them meeting and bonding."

The corner of Bodin's mouth quirked up. Elias *did* love to run and hide. It had been frustrating, but it had also been amusing to watch everyone else

get flustered. Bodin always knew where to find him though.

"That day…" Richard swallowed. "I was… distracted in my search for her."

"How?" Juniper asked.

When he seemed to look anywhere but at her, Bodin knew the truth.

Bodin sighed. "It's a lot easier to move about unnoticed as a valet than a guard. Easier to sneak off with a queen whose husband is occupied meeting with another king and his advisors."

Grief filled Richard's gaze as he gave a single nod of confirmation.

"You were… with my mother?" Juniper straightened to face him at the realization.

"And because of my foolish heart and poor choices, I wasn't there to protect the two of you." He visibly swallowed at the memory. "I found you sobbing behind the bushes a little while later. You told me your new friend made you hide before he was hurt by the scary man. I then saw the prince, but it was too late. If I'd just been there sooner… If I'd just continued in my search, my duty, instead of…"

Bodin closed his eyes as the pain of that day returned. He'd seen the two of them playing in the garden not an hour earlier, but he didn't think anything of it. He knew it was one of his brother's favorite places to go, and he'd always been safe there, so Bodin had continued on his way.

"By some miracle, you hadn't been hurt," Richard went on to Juniper. "But finding you in that situation, terrified, alone, and crying… It was the worst day of my life. Your mother's too once she heard what had happened; she's always felt so much guilt and regret about that day. Our selfish behavior…" He cleared his throat. "I carried you away and vowed to never leave you unprotected again."

That was why the man was so diligent.

"It wasn't your fault," Bodin said, opening his eyes. "I've carried that same guilt for fifteen years. Looked at it from every angle."

"You were still a boy yourself." Richard shook his head. "I was a grown man who had failed at my duty."

"Even if you kept searching, you might not have found them in time. You might have been killed. June might—" He choked on his words as he looked at his wife. If things had gone differently in any way, they would not have been brought together.

She met his gaze as if understanding. Getting to her feet, she crossed the space between their seats without a word and sat sideways on his lap to hug him. Bodin cradled her against his chest, pressing his lips to her forehead.

To Richard, he said, “It was Umbra who sent the assassin. Not Gilarn. They wanted to kill me to spark a war but came across Elias first. At least, that’s what I’ve pieced together. When interrogated, the man said he was sent by the Gilarnian King, but a group of Umbra rebels attacked me six years ago and claimed it was them. I assume the details of the assassin looking for me were still true.”

“Umbra is quite possibly more dangerous than the war itself,” Richard said in a hushed, haunted, faraway tone.

“Agreed.” Bodin ran a hand up and down June’s arm. “But my point is, even without your explanation, I would not have thought you were connected to Elias’s death simply because you are from Gilarn. And I do not care that you are from there. I know you are a good man. I’ve seen how you are with June. I trust you.”

Richard dipped his head. “Thank you.” He glanced at his daughter then back to him. “I feel the same about you.”

After a moment, Bodin said, “I do have one more question though. Did the king not think it strange to have his daughter hidden with a maid?”

“He knew about my magic,” Juniper said, standing and returning to sit beside her father. As if she *needed* to be near him now that they knew the truth. “He and my mother told me the reason I went with her was because they feared I would lose control in front of the court and others would think we were aligned with Gilarn.” She turned toward Richard. “Did she… know you were from Gilarn?”

Bodin could practically see the wheels turning in her head.

Richard’s brow furrowed as if following her line of thought. When he slowly nodded, Bodin’s stomach sank.

“So, how did she not know…?” she whispered.

“She *did* know,” a new voice said.

Bodin whipped around, hand splayed, but it was only Hugo and Laurent. Laurent went straight to Juniper, bending down and hugging her from behind. Bodin knew that his friend had been almost as worried about her as he had been. He whispered something that made her smile and elbow him in the stomach. It didn’t deter him though; he squeezed onto the end of the settee next to her, seeming as if he too needed the reminder that she was

here and all right. Were he anyone else, Bodin wouldn't allow such behavior. But he was grateful they had become such good friends so quickly. The two people he cared about most in the world.

"Where—"

"Rafe is talking to a few of your advisors about what to do next regarding the valley. Apparently, they caught word that we'd rushed in here and wanted to see what was going on, so he's explaining your injury and the need to recruit more soldiers to the front lines," Laurent said, as if reading his mind. "I told him I would meet him down there after checking in with you."

Bodin let out a breath, thankful for the prince's quick thinking.

Looking up at her other brother as he took an armchair opposite Bodin, Juniper said, "She knew?"

Hugo nodded. "I'm fairly certain. The last time I confronted her about it, she told me I needed to stop asking questions because she feared Father's reaction if he learned the truth. She wouldn't tell me who it was, but she confessed he was from Gilarn. I didn't know Richard was Gilarnian—I don't think anyone else did either, so there was no reason for my father to put it together. But she also hinted about that being the reason she stayed away too. She didn't want to draw his attention to you, June."

"All this time, I thought she hated me… that I'd done something to lose her love," Juniper whispered.

"She loves you more than anyone." He gave her a sad smile. "Before we left this last time, she went on a tangent about love, rambling about how nothing was more important and how we should do anything for those we care about. I thought she was referring to us stealing the soldiers to come fight for you and Bodin, but now…" Hugo glanced at Richard, "I think maybe she meant something more."

Juniper buried her face in her hands, leaning against her father, naturally seeking comfort from him as any daughter would. Bodin's *father-in-law*. She let out a muffled, "This is all too much."

Bodin wanted to go to her, scoop her into his arms. With a start, he realized he didn't have to deny himself that comfort anymore. He'd shared his final secret, and she still chose him, loved him. Getting to his feet, he went and knelt in front of her. He gently pulled her hands down then brushed at her damp cheeks with his thumbs. "I know, Sunshine."

She shivered, shaking her head. “I’m so tired of crying. Can we please just… move on? Where do we go from here? I need a new head guard, obviously, and—”

“No, you don’t,” Richard said. “This doesn’t change anything.”

Her face fell, and the man noticed.

“No, I just mean,” he added quickly, “I told you earlier that you are my family, and I meant it. You’ve always been like a daughter to me. Now that I know you *are* mine… the only thing that’s different is that we know the truth. I love you just as much as I did before, if not more, which I didn’t know was even possible.”

She bit her bottom lip, blinking and raising her eyes to the dark vaulted ceiling above them. “I said I’m tired of crying. Don’t make it worse.”

At the clear amusement in her tone, everyone chuckled, the relief palpable from the men in the room. Richard hugged her into his side and kissed her temple. She turned to wrap her arms around him. It was obvious that their relationship had always been that of a father and daughter. Now, they knew it was more than a feeling. It was real.

“Sir, I—” Bodin started before being cut off.

“Don’t you dare start addressing me so formally,” Richard said with a laugh.

Bodin’s heart felt so full in this moment, surrounded by his friends and family. They were only missing Nadine and Rafe. “You’re my father-in-law,” he said in a hushed voice. “You’re the father of the Queen of Mesairla. I can’t very well have you be our guard, and I certainly can’t just treat you like one.”

“You can treat me as you wish, but I’ve never entrusted her safety with another, and I don’t intend on starting now.”

They stared at each other in a silent battle.

“Besides,” Richard added, when he realized Bodin wasn’t giving in, “if people learn the truth, word will get back to King Pierre. Who knows what kind of trouble that could cause? It could even affect your arrangement, given that Juniper would not be considered a princess of Forosse. All of this would fall through. The treaty, the help he’s sent for the war, your marriage.”

Juniper’s eyes snapped to Bodin. He hadn’t considered that, and by the look on her face, neither had she. Putting a hand over hers, he said,

“Nothing will nullify our marriage. I don’t care if you are their princess or not; you are *my queen*.”

Her gaze softened. She turned her hand to hold his.

“But for the time being, I agree; it’s not worth the risk,” he said. “I think we should continue as normal.”

“We won’t tell anyone,” she said, straightening her shoulders, but Bodin could still see a certain sadness lingering in her eyes at having to keep their relationship a secret—she was clearly ready to claim her true father as such. “At least, for now. We’ll wait until…”

The war ends. She didn’t need to say it; they knew what she meant. One way or another, it would be over soon.

“Speaking of,” Bodin stood upright, “I should go meet with Rafe and my advisors.”

“No.” Juniper jumped to her feet and grabbed his arm. “Not tonight.” When Laurent chuckled, she reached over to smack his shoulder, not even sparing him a glance. “It’s been a long day. You were wounded on the battlefield mere days ago, rode hard the entire way here from Tusan, then fought a literal monster. Plus, you’re still in pain—don’t pretend you’re not. I can see the way you’re trying to hide it.”

Bodin interrupted her the only way he knew how. He covered her mouth with his in a searing kiss, not caring in the slightest that they had an audience. Breaking it, he smirked and asked, “Are you done?”

“Depends on how stupid you’re going to be.”

“Gods above, I love you.” Locking his arms around her waist, he lifted her against his chest and kissed her again.

“I think that’s our cue to leave,” Laurent said.

Bodin lowered his wife but kept a hand on her hip. “Thank you all again.”

They started to leave, but Juniper said, “Wait! Richard—Father—what do I call you?”

“Whatever you prefer,” he said. She seemed to hesitate. Bodin knew her well enough by now to know she would want to use *father*, but she wouldn’t be sure if she should. Richard moved closer once more, seeming to pick up on this inner battle of hers. “Why don’t we stick with Richard for now? We’re keeping it a secret anyway. This way you won’t accidentally slip up in front of others.”

“Right.” She nodded, clearly relieved she didn’t have to make the choice herself. “I was going to ask—well, I have two questions. Can you teach me to use my magic?”

“Of course.”

She grinned, wiggling like a giddy adolescent. But then, she stopped and said, “Do you have healing abilities too? Can you heal Bo’s burn?”

Richard met his gaze and dipped his head. “I can.”

And just like that, Bodin knew what they needed to do to win this war. He knew how to turn the tides and make it an even fight.

THIRTY-FOUR

Juniper

With one brother dead and the other banished to the shadows, Ronna had no one left. Her will to fight had disappeared, along with her desire to rule her kingdom and this world.

Light touches on Juniper's cheek woke her from the first peaceful sleep she'd had since Bodin left over a week ago. Keeping her eyes closed, she smiled as his arm tightened around her, his body curved behind hers. His fingers spread across her stomach before sliding lower. They teased the hem of the shirt she'd put on this morning—one of his shirts she'd taken to sleeping in while he was gone.

As soon as Richard had healed Bodin's shoulder and the two of them were left alone, it was like they couldn't rip each other's clothes off fast enough. Bodin had taken her hard against the side of the bed. They then took a bath together, where he held her in his lap and washed the grime off from fighting for her life in the woods. By the time he carried her to bed naked, the sun was rising and they were exhausted. She'd wanted more, but lying in his arms had been enough. She had grabbed the soft shirt, much to his dismay, and they had fallen asleep within minutes.

"I know you're awake." His deep, sleepy voice sent a shiver down her spine. Pushing the bottom of the shirt up, he caressed her bare hip, waist, and abdomen. "I love you in my shirt, but I'd love it more if it was on the floor."

She let out a soft laugh that turned into a gasp as he moved his fingers toward her center. “Bo, it’s too early. We need more sleep.”

“I *need* to feel you coming undone around me, screaming my name. We can sleep again after if you want.” He circled her clit, pushing with the perfect amount of pressure.

“Oh gods,” she whispered as heat pooled low in her stomach.

“No, sweetheart, not a god. Just your husband.”

She rolled her eyes but moaned as one finger began pushing inside. Someone knocked, and they both stilled. When the door opened and Nadine walked in, he abruptly removed his hand from between Juniper’s legs and made sure the blankets were covering them both.

“Nadine, I know you’re used to entering and going straight to work, but if you don’t start waiting until one of us says it’s fine, you’re going to see something you’ll probably wish you hadn’t.”

“Oh, please,” she said on her way to the wardrobe, not looking their way. “First of all, I literally help your wife bathe and dress every day. I saw her naked before you did.”

Juniper couldn’t help but chuckle, especially when Bodin grumbled under his breath.

Nadine ignored him and added, “Besides, it’s not like I haven’t caught you or Laurent doing worse.”

Juniper raised a brow and sat up, holding the blanket around her to fight off the chill in the air. “I feel like there’s a story there.”

The maid turned and held out a simple gray dress for the day. When Juniper nodded in approval, Bodin said, “No, there’s not.”

“Liar.” She looked at him and shook her head. “Now, you have to tell me.”

“Bodin behaves for the most part,” Nadine said, drawing her attention away from the man tracing a finger along her hip. “He did, however, kick everyone out of a council room once with…” She trailed off, and her entire body language shifted, her mocking grin falling.

“Camille,” he whispered. “It’s all right, Nay.”

Juniper nodded and tried lightening the mood again as she climbed out of bed. “So, they did it in the chamber?”

“Where anyone passing could hear,” she said, taking June’s lead and helping her into her undergarments.

Behind them, Bodin got up as well and put on a dressing robe while Nadine was facing away. “Fine, but she was my wife. And at least we tried to be quiet. Laurent is worse.”

She didn’t doubt it. Since the moment she met Laurent, he’d been overly flirty and confident.

Nadine had her step into the gown then pulled it up and began lacing the back. “There was one time I swear he was being loud on purpose. Do you remember that, Bo? When he snuck off to a closet with Jacques?”

“It’s burned into my brain,” he said, moving to his wardrobe.

“Jacques?” Juniper asked before she could stop herself.

“One of the guards.” Nadine directed her to sit at the vanity so she could brush her hair.

“Oh.”

Bodin laughed quietly and crossed the room to peck her on the cheek. “I believe my dear wife was surprised by the name, not wondering who it was. Forosse is not as tolerant as our kingdom. Laurent is… affectionate with everyone.”

“He’ll sleep with anyone who breathes in his direction,” Nadine added, rolling her eyes.

On his way to the screen to dress, Bodin paused. “Laurent cares for you a great deal, June. Please don’t let this change your friendship.”

Her eyes widened, and she turned on her stool. “I would never—that doesn’t matter to me. Hugo—”

She slammed her lips shut. The last thing she wanted to do was spill her brother’s secret. She just got him back in her life; she wouldn’t give him a reason to push her away again.

Bodin caught it though and gave a subtle nod, as if he understood. With a wink, he said, “All right, hurry up and finish getting ready. I have something to show you.”

Hand in hand, Juniper and Bodin walked down the spiral stairs with Richard and Samuel. She tightened her grip on Bodin as they reached the lower level. Her gaze went straight to the twelfth portal. Before, seeing it

had always filled her with curiosity and a sense of wonder. Now, it sent fear coursing through her veins.

"June," Bodin said in a firm but gentle voice.

Her eyes snapped to him.

"You're safe. I promise."

"I know." She attempted to smile at him; she truly did trust him.

But he seemed to see right through her. He released her hand to put an arm around her, and she hugged him from the side. When he led her to one of the other doors and held out a hand, he said, "Keys?"

She pulled them from her pocket—he had asked her to grab them before leaving their room. As he unlocked the door, she asked, "How did you get in yesterday without them?"

"I can use my magic; I don't need the keys. It's draining though." He removed the key but waited to push the portal open. "These make it easier."

Bodin slipped them into her pocket and said to Richard, "We'll be back in a little bit."

They had already discussed it and agreed that the others would wait outside the door for them. It was already nearing mid-day, and they were to meet with their counsel this afternoon. Because Bodin, Laurent, and her brothers planned to leave first thing tomorrow morning, they didn't have much time to spend together. Richard understood that they wanted—*needed*—to be alone while they had the chance.

Juniper gave him a smile, unsure how to act around him now. They had unveiled a great deal last night, and it was difficult to go back to normal. It still boggled her mind that he was her father. The discovery meant so much to her.

And yet, she couldn't help but wonder if he'd been right the previous night. Did it actually change anything? She was conflicted about the matter. On one hand, she felt like it changed everything because she hadn't experienced a loving parent since she was a child. But on the other, that wasn't really true. Richard had *always* loved her like family. He'd always been there for her and acted like a father.

"Ready?" Bodin asked, bringing her back to the present.

She nodded, and the excitement of wanting to see what was beyond this door returned. It was the one he'd asked her to wait to explore until he was home.

Bodin pushed it open, and she didn't bother hiding her gasp. Even Richard sucked in a breath behind her. She stepped through the faint light of the portal and into… Forosse. She was home.

"You—how?" Juniper released him as she quickened her pace down a cobblestone street in Nortussa. The castle loomed in the distance, but her attention was on the booths and games set up around her. Red pennant banners draped across the street from rooftop to rooftop. The symbol representing Ronna, Goddess of Unity, adorned them each. They were near the town square, where long tables were laden with enough food to feed those who could join.

Yet, there wasn't anyone else there.

"The Day of Unity celebration," she whispered as Bodin stopped beside her. "It's beautiful."

"I came here a few times with my parents growing up, and I loved it."

Juniper slowly walked toward one of the tables and picked up a piece of sweet bread. When she first arrived, she had been wary of eating or drinking anything in these portal lands, but now she knew it was safe. Though, she didn't fully understand how she could consume any of it when it wasn't real. Trying to figure it out made her head spin.

Nibbling on the bread, she wandered through the market. "I used to sneak out of the castle to see the celebration. I'd put on a cloak and escape Richard's watchful eye. He always found me down here, of course, but he never dragged me home. He would just stay in the shadows with me, buy me treats, and…"

Bodin approached on quiet footsteps. She felt his presence before he wrapped her in a hug from behind.

"I made… friends," she said, reminiscing. "Well, friendly acquaintances over the years, who I looked forward to seeing while away from the castle. A girl from the merchant district, a boy near the docks. Because my parents kept me hidden, no one recognized me, but I was still cautious."

He squeezed her a little tighter, reminding her that he was there for her.

"The girl, Leandra, would meet me for the festival. We would dance, and I'd buy us treats using coins Rafe would leave for me. Because he knew I'd need them. It was always my favorite day of the year. This year was the first I've missed."

"I'm sorry."

Juniper couldn't help but smile over her shoulder. "It was worth it." After a moment, she asked, "Did you make this for me?" She knew it deep in her bones.

"I did. I started before you arrived. It was supposed to be a wedding present, but then we got busy, the first attack happened, and everything was chaos for a while."

She took a deep breath of the familiar air. But even with the amount of love and attentiveness that clearly went into this place, a deep sense of melancholy settled inside. She hadn't felt homesick since leaving, but now that she knew the truth of her family, of her mother and everything her brothers did to protect her…

And this celebration meant everything to her. It was clear Bodin had taken great care in putting it together perfectly, and yet, without the other citizens, it was empty. She wanted to love it, to have a wonderful time in this beautiful gesture, but it made her heart ache.

"You don't like it," he said in a soft voice as he moved to stand in front of her.

"I do." She forced a smile onto her lips.

"June."

"I swear, I do," she said, even as her eyes welled with tears. "It's perfect."

Bodin tipped her chin up to meet his gaze. "Tell me."

She hesitated a beat before saying, "I miss it. I never thought I'd miss home, but I do. I miss the few people I considered friends, which feels strange since they didn't even know my real name. This is incredible. I'm so grateful and in awe of your creation, but it's… without the people, it's not the same. It doesn't hold the same joy and festive atmosphere. But I love it, Bo. I really do."

"Stop."

"No. Please believe me," she pleaded, not wanting to upset him or seem ungrateful. "I can't imagine how much magic and time this must have taken."

"Juniper." With both hands on either side of her face, he said, "Breathe, my love. It's fine. I'm not angry. You're right about it not feeling the same." He leaned down to press a soft kiss to her lips. "Let's get out of here."

"But—"

He gave her a genuine smile. “We can come back with Laurent, Nadine, Richard, and your brothers once I return again. And next year, if we can manage to end this war in one piece, we’ll travel to the real celebration. Together. No hiding necessary.”

“I would love that,” she said, meaning it wholeheartedly.

Bodin took her hand and led her back the way they came. They reached the door, which he locked after they left, as usual, then he went to one of the others she hadn’t explored yet. Unlike the first, this one didn’t give her any sense of being homesick. It did, however, take her breath away.

Juniper turned around and around in amazement. They stood in the center of the largest library she’d ever seen. The towering walls had full shelves up to the arched ceiling at least three stories above them. Narrow iron mezzanines gave access to the different levels, with spiral staircases on either end of the long room. There were also rolling ladders in places.

“June?”

“This is…” She shook her head. There weren’t words to describe how wondrous this place was, with its columns, white walls, and tall windows letting in warm sunlight.

Bodin walked toward an area of shelves, and she followed. She trailed a finger along the spines, reading the titles. They seemed to be about magic. He grabbed one from a higher shelf and offered it to her.

“*The Divine Battle*,” she said, flipping open the cover.

“It’s more of a fairy tale than a historical account, but I thought you might enjoy it.” He took a seat in one of the nearby armchairs then motioned for her to join him. “You were searching for more about the war when you found my journal?”

With a nod, she lowered onto his lap.

“This is about the gods and goddess, the war of Noxian and Lumen magic, and how this realm came to be what it is now,” he said, wrapping his arms around her. “I had the book as a child, but it went missing at one point. So, when I created this library, I remade it.”

Juniper looked around at the thousands of books. “How did you make all these? Surely you haven’t read this many… I…” It was impossible. She couldn’t even fathom being able to recreate this many books, and she had read *a lot* growing up—she didn’t have much else to do in her tower.

Chuckling, Bodin said, “I haven’t. Most of these aren’t real. If you open them, they’re blank.”

When she pouted, he tilted her chin toward him to brush a kiss across her lips.

"Sorry to disappoint, Sunshine," he whispered against her mouth. Then, he tapped the book. "I need you to read this because I need your opinion."

"What?" She opened the book again and turned through the first couple of pages. It wasn't a large book, and it had sketched images throughout, reminding her of what she liked to read as a child too.

"I think I know what we need to win the war."

Juniper's head whipped back up.

"The reason Gilarnians continue defeating us isn't because their numbers are that much higher or that they're better fighters," he said. "It's because they can heal. So, if we could find those with magic, like Richard, who would be willing to help us…"

"It could give us the advantage," she finished, her mind whirring in a hundred directions as she thought through everything. Leaning back, she met her husband's gaze. "How long do we have?"

"A couple of hours still until we need to be in the council chambers." He kissed her shoulder. "Plenty of time to read the book and have a little fun first—pick up where we left off this morning before we were so rudely interrupted."

Juniper licked her lips, giving her a moment to think through her response. Meeting with the advisors would likely last most of the afternoon and evening. Then, they would only have tonight together.

She didn't want him to leave again so soon. Nor did she want her brothers or Laurent heading into battle. The thought of losing any of them made her sick. And now, she was pretty sure he was taking Richard with him too.

She understood why they had to go. She understood how vital her true father's help could be in this war.

But he wasn't the only one with Lumen magic.

Taking a deep breath, she prepared to tell Bodin what she'd been contemplating since early this morning. She knew he wouldn't agree, but she had to do something. Trailing a finger along his jaw, she said, "I'm going with you, Bo."

THIRTY-FIVE

Bodin

Wanting to be free of it all, Ronna took to the stars. She gave the humans their world to do with as they wished.

For she no longer cared what happened.

"I said no." Bodin grabbed the pile of clothes Juniper just placed near her bag and stomped toward the armoire. "Absolutely not."

She ignored him and, not missing a beat, pulled another pair of pants from a drawer, and stuffed them into the bag instead.

Giving up, he dropped the clothes and reached for her. "You're not going."

"Yes. I am," she said.

He put his hands on her hips and guided her backward until she bumped into the bed. She grinned at him, placing her palms on his chest. Despite how determined and angry he was in this moment, there was a heated tension between them. There always was, it seemed. One he wanted to explore. Leaning down, he kissed her hard. Against her lips, he whispered, "No, you're not. You are going to stay here, where you're safe."

The sun was just on the brink of the horizon, and they were due to leave soon. They had been arguing about this since she first brought it up yesterday.

Tilting her head back, she raised a brow. “Because that worked out so well before.”

“Maybe if you listened to me and didn’t go snooping—”

“Bo, I’m going with you. If you leave, I’ll just follow later,” she said, twisting her arms behind his neck as he groaned in frustration, knowing that, given her history, it wasn’t a threat. It was a promise. “You know I will, even if you have guards with me day and night. So, which would you prefer? Am I going with you or alone?”

Gritting his teeth, he lifted her to sit on the bed and pushed her legs apart with his knee to step closer. He had no intention of letting her go with them to war, but he admired her desire to help. “You are infuriating, you know that?”

“Mhmm.” She pulled him down for another kiss. “But you said we were in this together, that I would stand at your side.”

“I need you here ruling in my stead.”

“Your advisors would do better. I wasn’t raised to lead, in case you’ve forgotten. I don’t know what I’m doing, and they’ve had to walk me through each step anyway, basically doing the job without any need for me to be there.”

He sighed then kissed the side of her neck. “June…”

“These are my people now; this is my kingdom,” she whispered. “It’s my fight too.”

She was right. He hated it, but she was.

Bodin grabbed one of her thighs as he pressed his growing hardness against her core. The soft moan she let out made it impossible not to want more. He slid his other hand up into her hair and kissed her deeply while she lay back, pulling him down with her. Covering her body with his, he rocked into her, needing all of this perfect woman.

Breaking apart, he stared down at her. His heart felt on the verge of bursting. How had he ever thought he’d known this kind of love before? “I love you, June. So fucking much.”

“I love you too.” She trailed a finger along his jaw, down his chest, and finally to the top of his pants.

“I feel like you were brought to me by the goddess herself,” he whispered. “Like we were always meant to find each other and that everything we’ve been through in the past was so that we could get to this point.”

Her gaze softened. “I’ve always felt as if Ronna was with me in spirit, guiding me, protecting me. Maybe it really was her bringing us together. A union of light and dark. That’s what she always wanted, according to the stories.”

Bodin wasn’t particularly religious, but he’d been thinking about that more and more the past couple of weeks. That was why he’d shared that book with June, which now sat in the bag she insisted on packing. His wife worshiped the Goddess of Unity, and that specific story showed just how badly Ronna wanted the two sides to live harmoniously.

And here they were. Proof that light and dark could not only coexist but could love each other deeply. It didn’t have to be a battle for power when they worked together, balancing one another.

As June started to unbutton his pants, he said, “Which is why I need to know you’re safe at home. You have very little training.”

“I never said I wanted to fight on the front lines.”

He stilled. He hadn’t even considered that. When she chuckled, he straightened and shook his head before shoving his pants to his ankles. Thanking the gods above for her short nightgown, he pushed the fabric up and out of the way, pulling her undergarments off too. Bending forward, he didn’t hesitate to lick along her seam, finding her already wet.

“Oh gods,” she hissed. “Bodin.”

He knew they didn’t have time, knew they should be preparing to leave, but there was no stopping this, no denying this need they had for each other. Pressing his tongue into her, he relished in her gasps. The taste of her, the sounds she made, sent his blood rushing south. He was painfully hard and needed to be inside her. Thankfully, she wanted that too.

“More. Bodin, please. I need you.”

Standing, he grinned and pulled his shirt off before sliding his tip up and down through her slickness. “Are you going to be a good girl and stop trying to make me mad on purpose?”

She bit at her lower lip. “Never.”

He couldn’t help but chuckle. Entering her slowly was tortuous in the best way. Once he was all the way in, he paused to let her adjust and reveled in how good she felt around him. He tugged the top of her nightgown down, slipping it off of her shoulders to expose her breasts. As he squeezed them, he said, “You could have just told me from the beginning that you didn’t plan on fighting.”

“I thought it was obvious,” she said, pulling him back down over her. “I’m not foolish enough to think I could stand beside you in a battle. But I know how to tend to the wounded, and I could be there for you at the end of the day.”

“You want to be…” He began thrusting, slowly at first, unable to stay still any longer. “Waiting for me to—” Her moan cut him off as he started moving faster, harder. “Gods, you feel so good.”

Juniper kissed his scruffy cheek, the scars marring his face, making his chest feel even fuller. Her fingernails scratched into the backs of his shoulders.

“You’re going to be in my tent,” he said, “waiting for me to fill you each night?”

“Yes!”

He stood straight to hook his arms beneath her legs. Bringing her knees to her chest, he used the leverage to pound into her, going even deeper. She screamed in pleasure, loud enough that he was sure half of the palace heard her. Sounds of their skin smacking filled the air.

“Bodin, I-I’m… Oh *fuck*.”

Spreading her legs wider, he leaned forward to cover her mouth with his once more. He needed to feel her body writhing against him, bucking against his hips, matching his tempo. “Come for me, love.”

He released one leg to reach between them and rub her clit. Her breathing grew ragged, and she moaned over and over with each thrust. He was so close; they both were.

“Come, Juniper. Let go.” To Bodin’s absolute horror a knock sounded on their door. It started to open, and he shouted, “Go away!”

Her back arched and another scream escaped her swollen lips as she came, light bursting from her skin. It was enough to send him over the edge. He groaned as he released inside her, twitching as she clenched around his cock.

“Your Majesty?”

“Get the fuck out!” He didn’t bother looking up at whoever had come to check on them—he was glad they did since she was screaming, but he was simultaneously furious that they had barged into the room. Burying his face into the side of his wife’s neck, he covered her body and continued to rock against her as they slowly caught their breath.

When he eventually stopped and they fought to catch their breath, she brushed her fingers through his hair and started giggling. Her soft laugh was contagious. “Someone caught us.”

Bodin smiled and kissed along her glowing jaw. “I don’t think they saw much.”

They better not have seen much. For their sake. He didn’t share. Juniper was his. Just as he was hers.

She let out a snort—a noise he’d never heard from her. Pulling out, he went to grab a cloth and wet it in the basin before returning to gently clean them both up. Once finished, he climbed onto the bed properly, grinning as she moved with him to curl against his chest. He wrapped her in a hug and pressed his lips to her forehead as her Lumen magic faded.

“Please don’t leave me behind again,” she said after a few peaceful minutes of silence, placing a hand over his heart. “The uncertainty of whether you were alive or not was agony, Bo.”

He brushed his fingers through her long blond hair. She had spent so much of her life alone; it wasn’t difficult to understand the lasting effects that had on her.

A knock echoed from the door again, and he sighed. “I might murder whoever that is.” Before getting up to answer, he told his wife, “You’ll stay near the tents the entire time. You won’t go to the front lines.”

“Promise.”

Bodin kissed the end of her nose and stood to grab his pants. As she worked the top of her nightgown back up in place, he pulled the skirt down. Once she was covered, he went to the door and ripped it open. “What?”

On the other side, Laurent smirked. “Are you two about done? You seem to have frightened off one of your guards.”

Sure enough, only Samuel stood outside the door. He lifted both hands in front of him in a gesture of innocence. “I told him not to open the door, but he was convinced you were in there torturing her.”

Laurent laughed. “Gods above, does our sweet little Juniper like it rough?”

“I’m not answering that.” Bodin scowled at him.

“The other guard was a young one, new to the job, Your Majesty,” Samuel said. “I doubt he’s had experience with such… passion. Let alone hearing it from his monarchs.”

Sighing, Bodin crossed his arms. At least Richard wasn't there. But then, it hit him. "Where's Richard?"

"He, um, went for a walk as soon as we heard the thumping and moaning begin."

Thank the gods. Richard hadn't been standing guard at night, so hopefully he hadn't heard much. Bodin had only been back for a day, but he and June definitely took advantage of their time together. He was trying to think of anywhere things might have escalated during the day when Richard was on guard, but other than the portal library, it had only been there bedroom.

They should work on that if they made it home…

And that was another reason Richard shouldn't be their guard. Bodin didn't want to constantly be concerned about being quiet because he was nearby.

Laurent was clearly biting his cheek to keep from laughing, and Bodin wanted to smack the smile right off of his face. Instead, he asked, "Did you need something? Why are you here?"

"The horses are ready," Laurent said, instantly switching into a serious tone. "And the princes are gathering the volunteers from the village to join us. They'll be ready to march within the hour."

Bodin had never wanted to force his people to fight. Fighting Umbra on that was what led to so much devastation. But if things didn't change soon, he wouldn't have another choice. Yesterday, he'd asked Laurent and the others to send out notices requesting that if anyone was able and willing to fight, they should join them this morning. He didn't expect many to show up, but he was desperate. They all were.

"And searching for those hiding Lumen magic?" he asked.

"We haven't been able to find any yet, but if the guards do, they promised to try to send them our way. They are also spreading the word that the prosecution law has been repealed."

"Thank you." Bodin sighed and ran a hand over the top of his head. "All right, we'll meet you down there."

As Laurent walked away, Bodin waited, taking a deep breath and preparing to face Juniper. He didn't want her going. It was too dangerous. But a small, selfish part of him was glad to have her with him. Leaving her again would have been nearly impossible.

Before heading back in, he turned to Samuel. “When Richard returns, please have him prepare to travel, and send a message to the stables to ready a carriage.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” There was clear confusion in his eyes, but he didn’t question the orders.

After everything, however, Bodin wanted to keep him updated. “He and the queen will be coming with me.”

The man dipped his head. “Then, I wish to as well, sire. If neither of you are remaining here for me to protect, perhaps I could serve you best by joining the fight.”

Bodin agreed. “Thank you.”

He meant it. Every person they could get on their side would help.

With that, he went into his rooms to find that Juniper had changed out of her dress and into pants and a tunic. She’d also braided her hair into one long plait and was currently trying to put a belt and scabbard around her waist.

Since meeting her, she had appeared soft, kind. Now…

She looked like a warrior queen preparing for battle.

“It’s just for protection,” she said, meeting his gaze. “I still don’t plan on fighting.”

He crossed the room to assist her. “Actually, I have something for you.”

Going to the bedside table, he pulled out the dagger with the ornate silver handle.

“How?” Her eyes snapped up and widened in horror. “Tell me you didn’t go back in—”

“No.” Bodin shook his head, grabbing her empty thigh sheath from where she’d left it in the armoire. “While you were sleeping, I went down to one of the other portals and recreated it for you.”

“Bo…”

He knelt and strapped it to her thigh. “You need a smaller blade than a sword, one that’s easier to maneuver. Trust me, this was a selfish move. I wanted you to have a way to protect yourself while I was gone. Now, I’m even more glad I did it.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. She played with his hair before tying it up for him. “I’ll try not to lose it this time.”

With a chuckle, he said, “I’ll make you as many daggers you want, Sunshine.”

When they finished helping one another, he stood, grabbed her face, and planted a hard kiss to her lips. They would do this together. Side by side.

Forever.

THIRTY-SIX

Juniper

With the gods and goddess gone from their world, the humans returned to their lives. But the time of peace did not last. They soon realized that the lake still gave magic to those who drank from its waters. And the valley was the only area of land that gave access to it easily. Both kingdoms surrounding it wanted control of Valétoi, and so they returned to war.

Despite insisting she could ride horseback, Juniper and Bodin traveled by carriage to the war camp. They'd been journeying north for two days now, only stopping when the soldiers, healers, and horses needed to rest.

Bodin had seemed beyond surprised when over a hundred men and women volunteered to fight. Even Inaya had asked to join them to help with the wounded. However, none of it shocked Juniper. Many of their people were still wary of the king, and she knew it would take time for them to overcome that, but she also knew that just as many supported him. Those were the ones who showed up to go with them, understanding that they might have been marching to their death.

In the carriage, Richard taught Juniper about her magic. He explained that it hummed in their veins, and it was simply a matter of calling it forward when needed. Bodin had explained that his was similar, so together, they tried to show her how to find hers. On their short breaks, they switched to attempting to use it.

Nothing worked though, and Juniper was growing frustrated.

“Take a deep breath,” Bodin said in a too-calm voice that grated on her nerves.

She glared at him in the dim light of the coach. The sun was setting below the trees, taking its heat with it. Juniper crossed her arms. “This isn’t working.”

“It might take a while,” Richard said, sitting across from them. “Especially since you were made to fear and hide it for most of your life.”

“We don’t have time,” she snapped. “We need Lumen healers to win this fight.”

“That doesn’t fall solely on you though—”

“I am the queen,” she said, cutting off Bodin. “This is the way I can help our people. Except, I can’t. Because apparently the magic only appears when—” Juniper slammed her lips shut with a glance at her father.

No one spoke for a long moment. Until the horses neighed and the sound of hoofbeats slowed.

Bodin broke the silence. “We’re stopping for the night. Richard, would you mind checking in with Laurent? We need a moment of privacy.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” Richard dipped his chin, and as soon as the carriage rolled to a stop, he squeezed Juniper’s hand and climbed out.

Juniper slumped down in her seat and listened to him telling the driver and guards that they needed a few minutes to speak alone. She closed her eyes, focusing on her breathing, her pulse. But the magic wasn’t there. When Bodin didn’t say anything, she sighed and looked at him. With a sad smile, he leaned closer. It wasn’t her he was reaching for though. He closed the curtains on the windows beside her, then he shut the ones on his side, letting darkness consume them.

“Give us some light,” he commanded.

She almost laughed. “I can’t, Bo.”

“Yes, you can.” He put a hand on her leg. “You’re overthinking this.”

“Of course I am,” she hissed. “How can I not?”

His fingers inched higher, and she jumped as his scruffy beard tickled the side of her face. He pressed a kiss to her jaw. “I can think of a few ways to get you out of your head.”

“You mean out of my clothes?”

Bodin chuckled. His touch found his target, and she sucked in a breath.

“We can’t do this here,” she whispered. “There are so many people around.”

“Then, be quiet.” He nipped at her earlobe, making her groan.

Pushing him away, she climbed atop him. In the dark, she stumbled and struggled, but eventually, with his help, she straddled his lap and kissed him. It wasn’t hard and quick though. She gently eased his lips apart, tasting him, breathing him in. His arms wrapped around her and she stopped to rest her head on his shoulder. Just sitting here in his arms calmed her in a way nothing ever had. Surrounding them were the sounds of people setting up camp, but here in the dark, it was only them. Like they were secluded from the rest of the world and its troubles.

“I want to be able to help,” she admitted.

Bodin rubbed her back in a soothing gesture. “I know.” He kissed her temple. “The people adore you, June. I’ve heard the whispers. More than that, I know how they feel about seeing royals at the warfront. Just being there will raise their spirits and rally their efforts. Knowing you are there for them, supporting them, seeing how they fight for us… that helps.”

“It’s not enough though.”

“Then, keep trying to reach for your magic,” he said in a soft tone. “I know better than most how infuriating it is not being able to control it, but you will get there.”

She marveled at his confidence in her. “How can you be so certain?”

“Well, for starters, you are a fighter. You don’t give up once you set your mind on something.”

“Is that your way of calling me stubborn?”

He chuckled, his chest vibrating beneath her. “Absolutely.”

Juniper let out a quiet laugh.

“But you’re also incredibly intelligent,” he went on, stunning her. When they argued a couple weeks ago, he’d made her feel otherwise by implying she was naïve and ignorant. To hear him say this now meant a great deal. “And you care more than anyone I’ve ever met; you have the biggest heart.”

The carriage began to lighten around them a fraction. At first, she thought someone had opened a curtain, but it was still just the two of them.

“So, I know you will do everything you can to figure this out and help our people,” he finished as the light brightened.

Her eyes pricked with tears, and she leaned back to glance down at her glowing body.

Bodin's palm cupped her cheek, lifting her gaze to him. "You don't need me to find these emotions that draw forward your magic. It's inside of you; it always has been. Grab on to this feeling *right now* and follow it. Find it deep in your heart and soul so that you know where to pull from in the future."

"Bo," she gasped his name then quickly wrapped her arms around his neck to hug him tightly. She could feel it, just as he described. There was a tugging, like a link from the magic to her beating heart. An invisible thread she imagined grabbing ahold of and tying it to her wrist.

Even as the light started to fade, she could still feel it beneath her skin. Closing her eyes, she imagined pulling it closer again. Behind her eyelids, she could sense the glowing light around them, flooding the carriage. A shaky breath escaped her lips just before Bodin kissed her again and said, "See. I knew you could do it."

She grinned up at him. He had believed in her, without a doubt.

"Let's go show Richard," she said, reluctantly climbing off of his lap.

Bodin opened the door and led her into the surrounding camp to find her father and brothers. He squeezed her hand in silent reassurance, and she found herself once again thanking Ronna for this marriage. For a husband who loved and supported her so much.

But he was wrong about one thing.

She did need him. She needed him like she needed the air in her lungs. He was the other half of her soul and the reason she was able to accept her magic as a blessing instead of a curse.

He was her reason for fighting. Because she wanted more time with him. She wanted to have his children, grow their family, and rule this kingdom side by side.

She wanted to wake up in his arms every morning for the rest of her life.

And to do so, they needed to end this war.

It was well into their fourth day of travel by the time they finally arrived at the war camp near Valétoi—the one place she never thought she would see in her lifetime.

“I know we said we were in this together,” Bodin started as the carriage rolled to a stop, “but are you wanting to go with me to meet with the generals? Or would you rather go to the healing tent and help there?” Before she could reply, he added, “I’m honestly asking, not suggesting you do one over the other.”

Around them came the sounds of soldiers preparing, others moaning in pain. She could even make out the faint shouts and fighting from the battlefield northwest of the camp. It was already overwhelming, and she hadn’t even seen anything yet. The curtains were still drawn.

When Richard decided to ride horseback on the last leg of the trek, giving them more privacy in the carriage, they’d used it to their advantage. Bodin had seen how nervous she was about arriving, and he’d made it his mission to distract her.

He had done an excellent job. But now, the memories of her biting his shoulder to muffle her screams when he hit that perfect spot inside her over and over faded into the worry again.

Taking a deep breath, she said, “I’ll help the healers.”

Bodin nodded but seemed to hesitate. She understood the need to savor this moment. Lacing their fingers together, he brought her hand to his lips. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” she whispered.

“I’ll have someone come show you where our tent is later this evening, unless I can get away to show you myself.” He pushed open the carriage door and hopped out then helped her down.

Chaos greeted her. Everywhere she looked, people were running about. It was as if they’d stepped into one of Bodin’s portals. A nightmarish one full of death. And it was more than just the soldiers dying. The little grass left in this area was brown and dry, crunching beneath their feet. A few trees were interspersed, but they too were lacking life and color. Even the sky here had become gray and gloomy, drizzling cool mist, the temperature dropping.

As if the world itself wept from this never-ending war.

“June,” Bodin said, drawing her attention back to him. “Stay close to Richard. Keep trying to use that Lumen magic to heal, but if you can’t, do not let it deter you. You’ll get it; I know it.”

Richard joined them now, along with Laurent and her brothers. She didn’t want to say goodbye to any of them. Then, Inaya walked over, as did

Samuel. Her new friends and family, all gathered in a place of so much loss.

Bodin squeezed her hand, likely sensing her sorrow.

“I’m going to go find Del, catch him up on everything,” Hugo said, leaning in to hug her tightly, almost like he was trying to make up for the years of missed hugs, while also letting her know, without words, how much he loved her.

Juniper pulled him closer for just a moment, silently communicating the same. “Tell him I said thank you.”

Hugo stepped back and nodded then turned to walk away. Laurent watched him curiously for a second before catching her eye. “I’m… going with him.” With a wink, he dove in for a quick peck on her cheek and said, “I’ll see you later, my love.”

She smiled and lifted a hand in a small wave, fighting back tears. Rafe gave Samuel orders, who took off too.

“We should get going,” her brother said. “Are you coming, or…”

“Going to help the healers with these two.” Juniper indicated Richard and Inaya.

Rafe visibly relaxed and inhaled before pulling her into a tight hug as well. “Do not leave that tent without someone you know.”

“I’m not going to sneak off in the middle of a war, promise.”

He laughed quietly, holding on for another few seconds before releasing her and stepping back, as her husband moved closer.

She faced Bodin with tears in her eyes. Swallowing, she said, “Be careful.”

Bending down to her level, he brushed his lips along hers. “I always am.”

And then, the two were walking away, taking her heart with them. A hand gently squeezed her shoulder as Richard said, “Come on, Princess. Let’s get to work.”

Juniper mentally shook herself, agreeing, and then she looked to Inaya, who nodded as well. Together, they headed toward a wide tent at the center of camp. The sight that greeted Juniper churned her stomach. She, Inaya, and Richard went straight inside the wounded tent to help where they could, but there were so many outside of it too. The camp was full of dying soldiers in every direction.

“Stick with me,” Richard said over the din of mayhem as he stepped closer.

“This is…”

“I know.” He put a hand on her back and guided her farther into the tent.

It was quieter in here, but only just. Many were groaning, begging for aid. Healers and other soldiers ran from bloody cot to bloody cot, doing what they could.

Juniper wasn’t a healer, but she could apply bandages and help move people around. She’d also observed Bodin stitching up a few men after the attack in Kehlir and thought she might be able to handle that if necessary. Richard stayed with her the entire time, also lending a hand.

Two days passed of the same nonstop rushing around. Her father was reluctant to use his gift at first, despite Bodin lifting the law, but he soon realized just how badly they needed it. He’d managed to do so discreetly, so only those who’d been healed were aware of what happened. At least, those who stayed awake understood. Most were wary but grateful. Juniper kept trying to find that ability within, practicing when she could without drawing attention.

Each day, she worked alongside her father and Inaya. Each night, she collapsed in the small tent she shared with Bodin. Both of them exhausted.

It felt as if this would truly never be over. That they would be stuck in this traumatic, overwhelming state of living forever.

But all things had to come to an end. Sometimes, long before people expected it.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Bodin

The fear between the two magics had grown when Theran killed Eryx. Those with light were seen as vicious, despite the fact that their power was not harmful by nature. And those with shadows were seen as sneaky and vengeful. Neither side wanted to give in. Neither side could learn to trust.

Heart pounding, Bodin ran east through the camp. He'd been helping on the battlefield, using his magic as well as his skills with a sword to fight alongside his men. Until he saw those white sails in the distance. Everything came to a halt in his mind for a brief second, then he was retreating, racing toward the war tent.

He found Rafe and Moreau already inside, the former dictating to a scribe.

Rafe lifted a hand to stop the young woman from writing. "I'm sending my father another letter. Perhaps knowing four of his children are here will change—"

"It's too late," Bodin said, cutting in. His chest heaved, and he braced himself on the large table with both hands. "It won't make a difference."

"What are you talking about?" Moreau asked, moving to stand next to him.

Bodin gulped down air, needing it to say, "Two more ships just arrived. From Gilarn. Large ones."

"*Shit*." Rafe shoved to his feet.

“That’d be close to another battalion.” Moreau gripped the back of his neck while looking at the map on the table. “We were just starting to gain some ground with the extra Forossan soldiers and volunteers from Kehlir. We can’t…”

A heavy silence filled the tent. Bodin’s lungs tightened, his heart pulsing too fast.

“We can’t make it through this,” he whispered. What in the burning hells would they do now? He thought through every scenario that came to mind, as he was sure the other two did. Smacking the table, he shouted at no one and everything. “It can’t end like this!”

“Do we retreat?” Rafe asked.

Moreau shook his head. “They’ll slaughter us from behind.”

“But would they?” The words slipped out before Bodin could stop them. Both men stared at him, waiting for more. But he didn’t really know what he was saying. “They didn’t want this war,” he said, deciding to process it out loud. “My father declared war, claiming they broke the treaty by killing my brother, but what if they didn’t? What if they had been speaking the truth when trying to convince my father not to attack?”

The tent flap opened. He looked over his shoulder, and his shoulders dropped. For the slightest second, he had hoped it was Juniper coming to find him. Not that she really had a reason to come to this tent—unless she wanted to sit in on the planning. So far though, she hadn’t. And with how busy they’d both been, they didn’t see each other except for when they crawled into their tent at night. He worried that this was too overwhelming for her. It was a lot to take in, and he couldn’t help but remember the way she retreated during her first weeks as queen. That didn’t compare to the stress here.

But it wasn’t her entering. No, it was Laurent walking in with both of the other Forossan princes. Everyone appeared as worn out as he felt. It had been days of this, and they had barely made progress. Now, it seemed none of that mattered.

“What are you thinking?” Laurent prompted, knowing him best.

Bodin glanced around at the other men, his mind whirling through options. “What if we surrendered? If they truly didn’t want this war, they might be just as desperate to end it as we are.”

“You want to just give up?” Hugo asked, incredulous.

Standing at his side, Laurent glared at him, but it was Bodin who said, “I want to see if they will negotiate a new treaty.”

More silence surrounded them.

It was their only chance at this point. Surely, they could see that.

“We can’t surrender though,” Delroy said. “That will give them all the power. It won’t lead to negotiations.”

“Then, how—” Hugo started, but Rafe cut him off.

“Start a new letter,” he said to his scribe. She didn’t hesitate to pull out a fresh piece of parchment. “He’s right, Bodin; we can’t surrender. But we can request a meeting with their leaders to discuss an armistice.”

“How do we get it to them?” Laurent said, crossing his arms. “It’s not like we can reach the other side of the valley, and there’s definitely not enough time to travel back through the kingdom, through Forosse, and sail north to approach from the other side. That would take weeks.”

Bodin nodded. “We don’t have that kind of time.” To Rafe, he said, “Draft several copies of the letter. Send each of them out—by land and bird—and hope that one makes it in time.” He took a deep breath and ran a hand over the top of his head. “Otherwise, we’re all dead.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

Juniper

2 DAYS LATER…

But every once in a while, a ruler would come about and try to negotiate peace. It would last for a time, but eventually, the need for control would reclaim the lands and people, and the battle began anew.

Juniper initially feared the blood and dirt would be permanently stained into her hands, but eventually, one of the other healers showed her, Richard, and Inaya where to wash up. Now, after being in camp for a week, she had a routine of visiting the spring near the mountains at the end of each day. Or rather, when she finally took a break to sleep and eat.

Tonight was no different. She'd walked northeast of the camp, past the war tent, with a group of others to clean off in the cool fresh water. It had long since gone dark when she made it to their tent, yet she still made it before her husband, who'd spent most of his time lately fighting on the battlefield with his people—against everyone's commands that he stay behind where it was safer. Rafe had done so, but Bodin refused. It terrified her when he was gone. It terrified her that Laurent, Hugo, Delroy, and Samuel were also out there. Everything about this scared her. The only way she got through it was by staying busy with the wounded.

Juniper sighed and lay back, missing their bed at home. She refused to sleep until Bodin returned. Not that she could while this worried anyway.

By some unspoken word, the fighting stopped when the sun set. Both sides were too exhausted to continue, and most nights, it was impossible to

see well enough to know who to go after. The soldiers retreated to regroup. A perimeter was set to make sure the other side didn't try to attack. Then, in the morning, it started over again with the first rays of sunlight.

However, even though the fighting stopped at sunset, Bodin and Juniper did not rest right away. While she helped with the wounded or with cooking, Bodin was planning and trying to come up with a way to win this war.

Releasing her braid and running her hands through her hair, Juniper yawned. She reached under her side of the bedroll for Bodin's second journal—the one he'd given her just before leaving. He'd explained that it was what he used after the other, and that it shared even more about the monster. She'd brought it along with the storybook about the gods and goddess

It still amazed her that she'd been able to take the storybook out of the portal world. Bodin had said that it was possible for small things he'd already created. For all intents and purposes, the book was real once made. It didn't take effort to keep it in existence. Just like the dagger he'd gifted her.

Honestly, it made her head reel a little bit. Bodin couldn't just create whatever he wanted anywhere. It was too difficult. He needed the confined space, such as the cellar rooms to expand and shift, manipulating it into whatever he wanted. Yet, even with that limitation… the possibilities were endless. She couldn't help but wonder if the portals could be used to help the kingdom. Their people would never need to suffer from things such as famine if he could create boundless crops. Could he create tonics? Medicines?

She leaned closer to the lantern, flipping to where she'd left off to read more about the Ombrete. Something tickled the back of her mind, and she knew it had to do with this book. Most of it was scribbles of random thoughts Bodin had while exploring more of his portal magic, similar to the first journal. But it was the shadow creature and what Bodin went through while dealing with that part of him that she kept coming back to.

It still broke her heart to know he had that inside of him. Where did it come from exactly? Bodin said it was once a powerful being, but what kind? She'd seen mentions of monsters in books about the past and in fairy tales, but none existed now, and nothing like the Ombrete. At least not as far

as she knew. If something like the Ombrete lived among them, they would know. It was vicious. Surely it would cause destruction wherever it went.

That thought reminded her of her previous idea regarding its potential use against their enemies. But Bodin couldn't control it. No one could.

It's a constant battle. Even after trapping it, I can feel it there, waiting to get out.

She sighed and shook her head. Turning the page, the next words brought tears to her eyes.

I'll never be free.

That was exactly how she'd felt growing up. When she was locked away, hidden from the world, she had been trapped, and though she had tried to keep her hopes up that one day, things would change, it wasn't always possible. Even when she'd found ways to sneak out, there were many times where the lonely hopelessness consumed her. And it became a more and more frequent struggle with each passing season.

It had been so bad near the end that when she was told she would marry a stranger—a king rumored to be a monstrous killer—she hadn't argued. She hadn't fought against it because she didn't think anything could be worse than where she was at the time. And if it was, she would have finally ran away.

The tent flap opened, and she looked up at her husband as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"June?" He quickly moved to her, kneeling on their bedroll and pulling her into his arms. "What's wrong? What happened?"

She lifted the book, and he took it.

"What is it?"

Shifting to wrap her arms around him, she rested her head on his shoulder. She wasn't sure how to voice why she was crying. "I… I felt the same. I felt the same, and then you…"

A squeak escaped her lips as he tossed the book aside and hauled her onto his lap. He cradled the back of her head, pulling her body as close to his as he could.

“I was so miserable and alone that I didn’t fight when I was told I’d marry you,” she whispered against the side of his neck. “I knew the rumors, but I was still willing to come because I thought… I thought it would be better than…”

Bodin pressed his lips to her temple. Distantly, she knew he was covered in dirt, blood, and the gods knew what else. She couldn’t bring herself to care though, regardless of the fact that she’d just recently washed up.

“I never thought I’d be free,” she said, sitting back just enough to see him in the flickering light of her lantern. “But you set me free, Bodin. You brought me into your home, treated me as an equal, as a friend, and I…”

He lifted a palm to her cheek. “I wrote that long before I met you.”

“It’s still there though. That’s what you said that day, isn’t it? You still feel the Ombrete within you?”

“Yes.” It was barely more than a breath, but it was enough.

Under his skin, he’d explained. Nodding to herself, she reached down between them to tug his shirt up. Once it was off, she put her hand over his heart. The feel of it beating beneath her fingertips made her sigh. How could something so dark and dangerous live in this kind soul?

That tingle returned to the back of her mind, followed by a soft warm breeze drifting in through the tent, and she bit at her lower lip.

“What?” He ran a thumb across her cheek.

Her thoughts jumbled, the words refusing to come out. The moment she said them, he would close those walls around himself again. She had no doubt about that. But with the amount of death she saw the last few days, she still couldn’t help but wonder if this was their answer. If it might be exactly what they needed.

“Please talk to me.”

“I…” She lowered her gaze. “I think you should let it out.”

Bodin tensed, his hand dropping to where her leg rested. He didn’t say a word, but his breathing quickened.

“We’re losing this war, Bo,” she started. “Our numbers are dwindling too fast. We’re not going to last much longer, even with the additional soldiers. You know that. Especially since more Gilarnian troops arrived.”

“Stop,” he breathed.

“I just think—”

“No.” He lifted her off of his lap and crawled as far away as their small tent allowed. “Stop, Juniper. I can’t.”

“But—”

“No!”

She startled and jumped back at the harsh tone. Her eyes widened. He’d never used that voice with her.

“Fuck, June. I’m sorry.” When he reached for her, she clenched her jaw but didn’t flinch or stop him. Instead, she let him pull her into his arms once more and embrace her. She straddled him as he held her close and repeated, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to lash out. I can’t release it though; I won’t risk my men, my friends.” He ran his fingers through her long waves. “I won’t risk *you*. I… I can’t lose you.”

Understanding dawned on her. He was scared because the last time it took over, he killed his wife and family. Leaning away, she took his face in both of her hands. His own tightly gripped her waist.

“You won’t lose me,” she said with all the false confidence she could muster.

Sliding a hand into her hair, he held her gaze. “If I become that… thing, I won’t have control. It’s like a completely separate being with its own mind. There wouldn’t be a way to *only* attack the Gilarnians. I’d hurt our people too, and there’s a chance I’d make it into the camp to destroy the rest of you before moving on to the rest of the kingdom.”

“You wouldn’t hurt me. I know you wouldn’t.”

He shook his head. “No, *I* wouldn’t. But that monster would if you crossed its path. The creature you saw in the portal? That was like an echo of the real one. It wasn’t as strong, as vicious. The real Ombrete would slaughter *everyone*.”

Juniper’s stomach twisted at the thought.

“And I wouldn’t survive that. I know I wouldn’t.” His voice lowered. “If something happens to you, if it’s my fault… I will never forgive myself. I don’t want to live in a world where you don’t exist.”

Wrapping her arms around the back of his neck, she kissed him with everything she had. He had to know she felt the same, that she loved him just as fiercely. That was why she had suggested it in the first place. They weren’t going to make it much longer in this battle. He and Rafe had sent out requests to discuss negotiations, but they hadn’t received anything back. There was no way of knowing if the letters even made it.

Bodin twisted, laying her down and hovering over her. He buried his face against her shoulder. “I love you.”

She didn’t think she would ever get tired of this, of him. As they continued hugging, kissing, clinging on to one another, she started to cry for another reason.

“June?” Bodin trailed his fingers down her cheek.

“I just…” she started, shaking her head. “I can’t lose you either. And I can’t stop thinking that something horrible is going to happen to take this all away. I’m so scared, Bo.”

Rolling onto his side, he tugged her against him. They had joked about the dirty things they would do to each other in this tent while they had time together, but right now, this was more than enough. He tightened his arms around her, holding her as she let out the fear and exhaustion.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “If I thought there was any chance that I could control it, I would do this. But it’s not worth the risk, Sunshine.”

She understood that, but she hated it all the same. If he did this, yes, there was a strong possibility he would hurt everyone in the camp. Yet, it could also be the way to save the rest of the kingdom.

“I love you,” she said, pressing a kiss to his chest, right above his heart. “Regardless of what happens, know that I’m so grateful I was brought to you, Bodin. Our time together…”

When she choked on her next words, he simply finished with a quiet, “Me too.”

THIRTY-NINE

Bodin

And as the human wars raged on, Ronna slept in the heavens above…

While Theran lurked in the shadows, waiting to return to the light.

Waiting to take back what was stolen from him.

The first time Bodin visited the Valley of Stars, he'd been a small child. He traveled with his family to drink from the lake, and they visited again when Elias was around the same age. It had been the most incredible sight, with luscious green grass and water sparkling in the sunlight.

Bodin was eighteen when the war broke out. It wasn't over the valley this time, but that was where it led and stayed. After a year of being kept away for his safety, he had convinced his father that he needed to see the grounds so many had fought and died for, to see what had become of those beautiful lands. Of course, he hadn't truly understood what to expect. Nothing could have prepared him properly.

He'd thrown up within minutes.

Watching people kill one another like that wasn't natural. It was disturbing and heart wrenching.

And it never got easier.

Fourteen years had passed, but the sight of so many lost lives still churned his stomach. It was too much. Yet, he needed to return. To fight alongside his soldiers.

The sky had still been dark beyond the tent when he had kissed his wife awake to say goodbye, despite knowing she should rest while she could. For the last hour, they had shown each other their love. Quietly. Slowly. Softly. He'd pressed his lips to every bit of her skin, savoring this time together.

Knowing it could be their last.

Every night could be their last. The Gilarnians had pushed their lines back nearly to the camp at this point. He still hadn't heard from their leaders, so he had to assume they didn't want to negotiate—that or the letters hadn't made it to them. Either way, they were out of time.

"Please," he said against her mouth after finishing, his hand still tangled in her hair as they sat together—her straddling his lap. Their ragged breath mingled; he remained inside her, feeling her tremors fade out. "You have to go home. If something happens to you—"

"How do you think I feel?" She cupped his jaw, forcing him to meet her gaze in the faint morning light peeking into the tent.

"Juniper—"

"Together. Remember?" Her lips brushed his again as she raised and lowered her hips. "We're in this together. No matter what."

He let out a sigh and nodded. "I love you, Juniper. Your arrival in my life was a blessing from the goddess. You are the best part of my life, and I hope we get more time because I haven't had enough." He pushed her hair behind her shoulder. "We could live an eternity, and it still wouldn't be enough time," he whispered into her ear.

He felt her body begin to shake, and tears hit his chest, and it nearly gutted him to realize she was sobbing.

"Please don't cry, Sunshine." Bodin kissed her forehead and wiped her cheeks with his fingers.

"You have to make it through this," she said, trembling in his arms. "You *have* to, Bodin. I can't…"

Around them, the sounds of people preparing for the day broke the quiet stillness of the morning. He needed to dress and get out there. Wrapping his wife in a tight hug, he shifted to lie down and roll over so that she was on her back. Still half-hard, they stayed joined for a few more minutes, needing that connection for just a bit longer, before he finally slid out.

"I will do everything I can to return to you. I promise, June," he said with another kiss. "I will fight for a future with you."

Nodding, she whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Neither said another word as they cleaned up and got dressed. They hesitated before leaving the tent but eventually emerged, hand in hand. With a deep breath, he faced her. He didn’t know how to say goodbye. Today felt different, like things were truly coming to a close. He couldn’t shake the feeling that this was it. The end was here. When she stepped closer, he immediately wrapped his arms fully around her, bending to bury his face in her hair.

“Thank you.” She rested her head against his chest. “For my freedom. For showing me love,” she said, as if she also had this foreboding feeling.

Bodin didn’t have the words to explain just how much she’d set him free too. So, instead, he told her, “You never need to thank someone for that. Least of all me.” He closed his eyes briefly. “Promise me you’ll try to stay safe. Go to the healers’ tent and do what you can there. Do *not* go toward the battlefield under any circumstance, do you hear me?”

He could practically hear her eyes rolling as she said, “Why do you and my brothers keep saying that? What makes you think I want to go anywhere near that?”

“Just promise me,” he said against her hair with a small smile, loving that he got a little of that sass to make a reappearance.

She nodded with a sigh. “Promise.”

“And if it looks like we’re going to be overrun, take a horse and go home.”

“Bo—”

“You are the *queen*, Juniper. One of us needs to survive.”

She pushed back, and he opened his eyes. “We’re *both* going to survive. You are the king. If it looks that bad, you have to promise me you’ll turn back too.”

He stared at her, mesmerized by those green irises sparkling in the sunrise. That flame he’d noticed the first night they met was shining bright as she waited for his response. If this was what it took for her to agree, he would tell her what she needed to hear. “I promise.”

“Then, so do I.”

Bodin knew she was lying just as much as he was, but he still leaned down to give her one final kiss. “I’ll see you later.”

“You better.”

With that, she turned and headed toward the growing area of camp occupied by the wounded. He watched her walk away until she disappeared among the tents and soldiers. His chest ached, as if his heart was literally breaking.

Steeling his spine, Bodin turned on his heel and headed in the opposite direction. But he wasn't going straight for the battlefield. No, he needed to make one more stop first.

Thankfully, the youngest Forossan prince could be counted on to be running late. Hugo was sitting outside of his tent, lacing up his boots. When Bodin neared, his steps faltered as another figure emerged.

Hazel eyes met his, followed by a cheeky smirk. Bodin shook his head with a chuckle.

"We might die," Laurent said, shrugging. "Might as well have a little fun first."

"But with the moody prince?"

"Don't talk about me like I'm not right here," Hugo said.

They both ignored him. Laurent finished buttoning his pants. "He's not so bad when his mouth is occupied and he can't talk."

Hugo pushed to his feet and grabbed his chainmail. "Seriously?"

Bodin smiled in earnest as he watched his best friend snatch away the armor and assist the prince. Bodin didn't really know Hugo, but from what he'd gathered, the two were nothing alike. Yet, here they were, helping each other prepare for the day like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Then again, he knew better than anyone how well opposites could balance each other out.

"Was it worth being late, at least?" he said, crossing his arms.

Laurent scoffed. "What, like you're not late for the same reason?"

"Stop." Hugo drove an elbow back into his stomach, cutting him off. "That's my *sister*."

"*Fuck*," Laurent hissed and shoved him away. He rubbed at his abdomen; he wasn't wearing armor yet. "Don't be an ass. I was just teasing him."

Hugo shook his head. "Well, teasing or not, I don't even want to think about Juni doing that. Married or not." Looking at Bodin, he said, "Sorry. I'm going to get something to eat quickly so I don't pass out, then I'll go. Don't worry, I've already been shouted at by both brothers to hurry up. Sorry I'm not in a rush to die."

“So optimistic,” Laurent muttered, pulling on his own armor.

“I’m not here to yell at you.” Bodin shook his head. The prince was only twenty-four years old, yet he was prepared to fight in a war that wasn’t his. When Hugo and Laurent started bickering again, Bodin stepped between them and made the former focus on him. He was ready to beg if he had to, but he didn’t think it would come to that. He’d seen just how much Hugo cared for his sister, how he’d already done so much for her. “I need you to do me a favor.”

They weren’t going to make it out of this. Bodin knew that within a few hours. Heavy clouds blotted the sky, but through them, the sun peaked out from its place directly above them. Despite the crisp air in this northern region of the kingdom, sweat pooled beneath his armor. His entire body ached with each swing of his sword and burst of magic he used to push back the enemy.

All around him, every way he looked, soldiers fell to the destroyed land. The Forossan army helped, but only enough to keep them going this long. They were outnumbered, tired, and losing ground. Especially when Lumen magic made the opposing side nearly invincible. How could they defeat an army that could heal almost instantly?

Only fatal blows were sufficient here. And with their chainmail and armor, that was nearly impossible on the first attempt.

Parrying a strike, Bodin twisted away from a blade aimed right for him. He used his magic to shove away the Gilarnians, but he was growing too weak to keep doing that for long.

Leaving Juniper that morning had been one of the most difficult moments of his life. Because he knew instinctively that it was very likely their last together.

Which was why he’d then gone to Hugo and made him promise to get her out of here if it looked like their time was coming to an end. To carry her away if needed. Her brother hadn’t wanted to abandon them either, but for her, he agreed. The man who first seemed like an arrogant ass cared more than Bodin ever would have imagined. He was the one who protected her for the past decade, keeping his distance so she would be safe, and then

at the first opportunity he saw, he got her out of that tower to freedom. They had been the closest of friends, from what Bodin had heard. He could only imagine how painful the last decade had been for Hugo, knowing he had to hurt her on purpose.

"Bodin!" someone shouted, drawing his attention just in time to duck out of the path of another sword. He twisted to drive his own blade into the soldier's side through a gap in their armor.

Rafe appeared nearby to help him with what appeared to be a fresh wave of men. "What's the plan now?"

"I don't know," Bodin said with a grunt as he took down soldier after soldier. "What are you doing here? You should be back in the camp where it's safe!"

"So should you," Rafe yelled.

Bodin blocked an attack from the prince's other side with his magic. "You're the crown prince."

"And you're the fucking king!" Rafe struck another Gilarnian down. "Besides, I have four more brothers at home who can take the throne if I don't make it. *You* don't have an heir."

"We can't hold on like this forever," Laurent said as he joined them, coming up behind them.

"I'm—" Bodin used his magic to stop more soldiers from approaching. "Aware."

He caught another charging from out of the corner of his eye, and he swung an arm to knock aside the sword aimed for him, grateful for his armor. Rafe took over, finishing the soldier. Bodin stretched and shook his arm, sore from the impact.

"Rafe, you should go. We're not going to win this battle," he yelled over the shouting and clanking of metal on metal. "Take your brothers and sister and get out of here. This isn't your fight."

The prince whipped his sword around to fend off another Gilarnian. "Like hells it's not!"

"We're brothers now," another voice said from his left. Delroy moved with such grace and power. It was easy to see why he was considered the best swordsman in Forosse.

His words struck something deep in Bodin. He'd barely spoken to Delroy, knew almost nothing about the second eldest prince, so to hear him say they were brothers meant more than Bodin could express. It nearly

choked him up, and he couldn't help but think of the brother he lost… which had started this war in the first place.

"I wasn't there for Juni over the years," he went on. "I won't abandon her again. And we all know she's not leaving here without you."

"He has a point," Laurent threw in.

Bodin mustered up more magic to push back the wall of soldiers running at them. He used the shadows to send them to the ground, breaking necks when he could manage.

"We've never agreed with our father who thinks love is a weakness," Rafe shouted. "If we go down, we go down together. As a family."

Bodin shook his head, at a loss for words. Before he could figure out what to say to these men—his brothers—a familiar shout rang out, and he turned to find Richard falling to his knees.

His heart stopped in his chest. What was the man doing here? He was supposed to be helping the wounded and protecting June. Bodin had counted on him to stay by her side.

Horror crashed through him when Laurent yelled in agony not a minute later. Bodin whirled around, only to find Hugo jumping in front of Laurent's fallen body. He killed the attacker before kneeling beside Laurent.

Bodin couldn't breathe. This was actually happening. They were all going to die.

Then, it hit him.

Hugo was on the field. Why in the burning hells was he out here?

"Where's Juniper?" Bodin asked, but he was too quiet to be heard over the chaos. His stomach sank with dread, and he turned on the spot, looking around as if he might be able to see her from here. Despite only being able to see the edge of the camp, he thought he caught a glimpse of blond hair. He ran in that direction, but a piercing pain in his back made him stumble forward.

Dropping to his knees, he barely managed to block the next strike as he pivoted around. Having followed him, Rafe stepped in to drive his sword through the man's neck.

"Bodin?" He held out a hand, but the king couldn't get up. Pain coursed through him.

But that wasn't the only thing.

The darkness he'd fought for so long had returned in full force. Just like that first time, the Ombrete was pushing to the surface, wanting to save his

life and slaughter the enemy. Because if Bodin died, the monster would no longer have a host.

He thought about June's idea to use it to fight back. As more and more men fell to their deaths, he wondered if perhaps she was right after all.

Not that he had much choice. He tried to feel the portal back home. If he could just feel that door, imagine it closing on the monster, he might be able to ground himself and stay in the present, but there was too much going on. Too much pain and fear. It was overwhelming, and the vulnerability left him susceptible to this creature that was now grasping for control.

It's time, King, a deep voice said in the back of his mind.

Bodin fought to block it, but he couldn't focus on keeping it out.

Everyone around him was dying. He didn't know if Richard or Laurent were still alive. He didn't know if his wife was safe.

Juniper.

Bodin looked up at Rafe. "Get out of here. Find June and leave. Get as far away as you can as quickly as you can."

Rafe's brow furrowed. "What? Why w—"

"Go through the forest; don't linger out in the open," he said, cutting him off. "Tell her that I tried to fight it, but it's too strong."

"What is?"

The Ombrete growled in his head, ready to emerge. Bodin clenched his jaw and dropped his sword. "She'll explain. Just call a retreat. Get our men out of—" One of his legs snapped, reshaping, and he yelled in agony. Through his teeth, he said, "Tell June I love her. Tell her that she made me see the light again when I thought my world would be dark the rest of my days."

"Bodin." Rafe put a hand on his shoulder.

Bodin fell forward onto his hands as his spine shifted. "She'll be… a fantastic ruler of this kingdom. Make sure… she knows that." Shadows swirled around him, growing and changing. "Get everyone… out… of here! Go!"

His voice came out in a growl. And this time, Rafe's eyes widened in understanding. He backed away with a nod then turned and shouted at their men. Bodin couldn't hear what he was telling them and his brothers, but he did see when the princes nodded and Rafe started running toward the camp. Bodin just hoped Juniper was still there for him to find.

The shadows spread out from his transforming body. He glanced at his hands that were now as black as night with claws as long as his human forearm. As the Ombrete continued taking over, he prayed to the goddess to keep his wife and friends safe. He prayed that they made it home and that this monster didn't follow after them.

His vision blurred. He'd locked away his darkest magic, keeping the monster away for years. But he would have shown it to the whole world if it meant saving Juniper. If it meant saving the woman he loved, he would have done anything.

Now, he had no choice.

He was shifting, and there was no stopping it.

Fangs broke through his gums, and it felt as though his skin were being ripped from his body. Distantly, he was aware of the shouts of fear surrounding him.

Closing his eyes, he thought of June's radiant smile and the way she liked to lay atop him while sleeping. A single tear rolled down his cheek, and then…

Nothing but darkness.

Nothing but screams of horror as the Ombrete destroyed everything in his path.

And Bodin was finally able to confirm who this monster truly was.

The God of Light.

Hello again, King.

FORTY

Juniper

The soldier Juniper was bandaging cried out, and she shook her head. She put a hand on his bloody shoulder to keep him from sitting up. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, but you need to stay still.”

Inaya ran to help her. The young woman took over bandaging his leg while Juniper tried to soothe him.

“Please,” he begged. “Make it stop.”

“Almost done,” she whispered, grabbing his hand to squeeze. She looked around for Richard but couldn’t spot him anywhere.

“It’s too much.” The man groaned loudly when the healer tied it off.

“There, see? We’re done…” Juniper trailed off as she brushed dirt from his face and recognition set in. “Samuel?”

He met her gaze, as if just seeing her too. “Your Majesty? W-what…”

His eyes rolled back.

“No!” She put her palm against his cheek. “Stay with me, Samuel. Wake up.”

“He’s bleeding too much,” Inaya said, rushing to grab supplies to stitch him up.

Juniper closed her eyes, searching for her light magic. Her emotions played directly into it revealing itself, but even after practicing the last week and a half, it was never as bright as when Bodin helped her.

She took a deep breath to focus again, trying to narrow in on the way her husband made her feel loved, safe, free… powerful. She pictured the way Bodin held her that morning, and warmth bloomed in her chest. Richard had told her to use those feelings, to remember how her magic

responded and to mentally grasp on to it. He'd explained it as being like a tether from her heart to the light; she just needed to follow it to find it again.

Samuel convulsed beneath her, and she shook her head. This man had been by her side since she'd arrived. He'd protected her without question, even stepping in between her and Richard when he thought their argument was going too far. She could not lose him. He was more than a guard; he'd become a friend. A comforting presence.

Keeping her eyes closed, she imagined following the connection to her magic and silently prayed to the goddess that she could heal this man. That warmth flowed from her chest into her fingers, and she mentally pushed it farther. To him.

A gasp rang out, and her eyes snapped open. Juniper stared down at him in shock. He stared right back. His breathing was shaky, but he was alive and conscious.

"The bleeding slowed," Inaya whispered with clear awe in her voice. "You did it."

Juniper smiled and brushed a strand of dirty hair from his dark brow. She'd told Inaya the truth on the journey here, and she'd seen Richard use his healing abilities. Inaya had encouraged her every day to keep trying when Juniper couldn't do the same.

"Welcome back," she told Samuel with tears in her eyes. She actually did it.

The magic she'd been told to hide most of her life healed him, stopped him from dying. And now that she knew what it felt like and how to find it, she was fairly certain she could do it again.

When shouts carried on the wind to their tent, she glanced from the opening to the healer. "Can you finish here?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." Inaya dipped her chin.

"Juniper," Samuel said with his usual authoritative tone. "Don't you dare—"

But Juniper was already up and running outside.

Chaos greeted her from every direction. Soldiers yelled in agony and fear. She grabbed one and asked, "What's going on?"

"We're losing! They've outnumbered us too much, and we don't stand a chance."

She didn't stop him as he ran off. If he wanted to leave and seek safety, she didn't blame him. His words repeated over and over in her head though.

They needed as much help as they could get, and if that meant healing people on the field to keep fighting, she had to try.

Ducking around the corner of the tent, she went to the pile of weapons they'd collected from those who'd returned to be healed but didn't make it. She searched through the mess of bloody iron until she spotted what she needed. The thin sword was lighter than the others, easier for her to manipulate than the one she'd left in her tent. She took a couple of practice swings. It had been far too long since she'd had any sort of training, but she could at least attempt to protect herself this way. It would be better than her dagger, which was strapped to her thigh. She had no desire to get close enough to the enemy to use such a short blade.

Juniper straightened her shoulders and headed toward the battlefield, breaking her promise to her husband and brothers. They would just have to get over it; she wasn't going to allow them to die if she could help it.

Nothing could have prepared her for the sight of so many dead and wounded bodies spread across the Valley of Stars. *Valley of Death*, some appropriately called it. What she'd seen upon arriving was nothing compared to this. Her stomach heaved, threatening to empty on the bloody, torn-up ground. How could this happen? Was the magic from the lake truly worth all this?

She didn't understand how anyone could think that. It was disgusting, disturbing. Heartbreaking.

Swallowing down the bile in her throat, she raised her sword and looked around for someone to heal. It was impossible to tell the dead from the wounded.

Her chest tightened to the point of pain when she managed to find her husband and family. As she watched, over a dozen enemy soldiers moved in to surround them. She tried to yell, to warn them of the ones creeping in from behind, but her voice was lost in the cacophony.

Bodin fought off a few, but Richard fell to his knees a short distance from him. *Richard*. Why was he out here?

Juniper had to get to them. She wondered if her father had the same idea as her about healing those directly in battle. He was still fighting, and she knew he could heal himself, but she couldn't help but run toward him.

Silver blocked her view, and she realized it was an enemy soldier lifting their blade toward her. She barely got her own up in time to block it. The hit

was too powerful though, and her arms folded under the impact, pain splicing through her wrist.

Juniper dropped the sword as she ducked out of the way of the man's next strike. She twisted to the side, grabbing her dagger in one swift move. When she turned back toward the soldier, his eyes widened. She looked down at the blade sticking into his gut through a space in his armor. Ignoring the tears stinging her eyes, she drove it in farther, angling upward as much as possible.

The man sputtered, and she reached out to twist his wrist before he could bring his sword down again. It fell to the ground just as he did.

She whirled back around to find her family. A scream left her lips as she spotted Laurent being stabbed and crumbling. She took off toward him, her heart in her throat. When another soldier charged at him to finish the job, she cried out, but no one could hear her. Her legs burned as she ran as hard as she could across the uneven terrain littered with bodies. She couldn't watch her best friend die.

The Gilarnian raised his sword…

But Hugo jumped between them, taking out the nearest enemies before dropping to his knees next to Laurent. He pressed his hands over what Juniper assumed was the wound, and she could see the horror and pain in her brother's face as he shook his head and spoke to Laurent. She didn't think they even liked each other, but Hugo looked distraught, like he was losing his closest friend.

Bodin was close, but before she could get to him, he took off in another direction. She didn't bother following. She had to get to Laurent.

Finally, she reached them and collapsed across from her brother.

"What—" Laurent coughed and groaned. "In the… hells… are you doing here?"

"You're supposed to be in the healers' tent," Hugo shouted at her. "You promised!"

"Just protect us while I help him!" She put her hands over Laurent's chest.

Hugo hesitated only a beat before jumping up, sword drawn and ready. It warmed her heart to know that he trusted her enough to listen.

"Juni—"

"Shhh." She cut off her friend, shaking her head. "Save your energy. Just stay with me, all right? I can fix this." When he grabbed her hand, she

entwined their fingers with a nod. Leaning down, she put her forehead to his, trusting her brother to keep them safe. “Please,” she whispered to anyone who might have been listening. “You can’t leave me.”

Her first real friend outside of her brothers. The man who’d made her smile and laugh, treating her with nothing but kindness from day one. Even when he’d been ordered to lock her in her rooms for having magic, he had tried to comfort her and promised to find answers. He’d teased her for weeks with his incessant fake flirting, and she couldn’t imagine never seeing him wink again.

Familiar warmth began to spread through her. She didn’t bother wiping away her tears as she tried to imagine her magic flowing into him to stop the bleeding and heal the gash in his abdomen. Just as she’d done with Samuel.

It wasn’t only Bodin’s love that could bring it forward. It was her love for her friends and family. And she realized in that moment that she had the power to control it on her own.

After a moment, Laurent’s ragged breathing eased into a normal rhythm. A large, calloused hand cupped the side of her face, a thumb brushing at the dampness on her cheeks, and she let out a sound that was part-sob, part-sigh of relief. She opened her eyes to meet Laurent’s hazel gaze.

“I knew you couldn’t live without me,” he said with a familiar smirk. Juniper shook her head with a shaky laugh and bent to hug him. His arm came up around her, holding her just as tightly. “Thank you.”

Sniffling, she nodded against him.

A deep growl reverberated through the ground, and they both stilled. Screams filled the air. Juniper had heard that sound before. She knew only one creature made it, and her heart thundered in her chest at the reminder.

Leaning back, she met Laurent’s gaze, which held just as much terror as she felt. She didn’t want to look and confirm the truth.

Someone grabbed her arm and hauled her to her feet. “Time to go.”

She finally turned to find it was Rafe urging her to leave. Hugo rushed to Laurent, helping him up and letting him lean against his shoulder. Juniper whirled around. “Where’s my father?”

“One of the other soldiers was helping him back to camp,” Rafe said. “He was hurt, but he’ll be fine. He just needed somewhere safe to heal himself.”

“What about Del?”

“Here,” another voice said as an armed man joined their huddled group.

A shadow passed over them. Juniper held her breath as she watched the Ombrete fly across the battlefield with a screech. It was too high in the sky to see it well, but one thing was very clear.

This was the real monster.

Juniper now understood what her husband had meant when he’d said the other one was just an echo of the true being. Even from here, she could tell it was larger, more solid, despite its shadowed body. She ducked on instinct when fire sprayed from its mouth, burning the enemy soldiers on the spot.

She lifted a hand to cover her mouth. It had been her suggestion to let the beast out, but she hadn’t truly understood what horrors it would bring. She hadn’t pictured the screaming men and women running from the monster with their bodies covered in flames. That image would never leave her.

The sides of the war no longer mattered. Everyone was seeking nonexistent shelter in this wide-open field. Everyone was dying together.

“I’m going to be sick,” she whispered.

Rafe put an arm around her, making her turn toward him more, covering the side of her face with a hand to block her view. Always the protective older brother. “We need to go. I’ve called for a retreat, but it doesn’t matter anymore. No one will stay. He made me promise to get you home, Juni, because he can’t…”

More shouts went up, and someone bumped into them in their hasty retreat. Juniper almost fell, but her brother steadied her long enough for them to see the pandemonium spreading. The Ombrete had pivoted, turning on their army. It lunged toward the ground, clawing and biting, breathing more flames. Shadows swirled out from it like extra limbs to grab people and throw them aside. Or worse… rip them apart.

“He can’t control it,” she finished.

Bodin had made it clear that he didn’t want to do this. He’d been right about the real creature being more vicious than the one in the portal. This one was like a monster straight out of a nightmare. Everything about it seemed magnified. Its fangs and claws were longer, its wingspan wider. It held no amount of mercy for anyone.

And she'd been the one to suggest he let the monster out. She'd practically begged him. "This is my fault."

"No, it's not," her brother said, still trying to drag her away.

But as she watched, that warmth in her blood returned. Glancing down at her glowing hands, she swallowed. Her own words from a few days ago repeated in her head. *I'm pretty sure we were made for one another. Your dark magic, my light magic… We balance each other out.*

She looked up as the Ombrete launched back into the sky to make another sweep across the field. What if she'd been right? What if that was the key?

"How do you get rid of darkness and shadows?" she said more to herself than Rafe. When she met his concerned gaze, she lifted her free hand. "Light."

Rafe started shaking his head, as if he knew what she was thinking. "No." He tightened his hold on her. "Don't—"

"I have to."

He tried to pull her along, but she dug her heels into the dirt. "No, Juniper Nichole. We're leaving, now."

Taking a deep breath, she glanced at the monster once more before nodding in agreement, even as the tears returned. She rushed southeast toward the camp with the four of them. Four of the most important people in her life. More were already in the camp.

But the one who owned her heart was out on that field, trapped in darkness.

"It's coming this way!" someone shouted, causing even more chaos.

Hugo and Laurent turned with horror on their faces as they looked behind her, but Rafe's attention landed on her. "Juni—"

"I'm sorry," she said, whipping her dagger up to slice his forearm just enough to make him release her and falter for the briefest second.

He shouted in pain. The others yelled her name, and she was distantly aware of someone reaching for her.

But she was already gone, running against the crowd.

Straight toward the monster controlling her husband.

FORTY-ONE

The Ombrete

The screams and shouts of men only fueled my need for blood. With each death, I felt more alive.

When the king fell in pain surrounded by chaos, I'd seen my opening and knew he wouldn't be able to fight me any longer. For years, he'd kept me trapped in his mind, and that brief moment of vulnerability was my chance to seize control.

Tossing my head back, I let out a growl before tucking my wings in to swoop down low again. Heat coiled in my throat, and I opened my mouth to let the fire burn anyone who stood in my path. Their pain and agony spurred me on. I soared across the field, watching the mayhem. It didn't matter which side of this never-ending war they were on; I would destroy everyone and seize this world once and for all.

I dove at a group of soldiers and clamped my jaw around one. Bones crunched between my fangs, and the copper tang of blood coated my tongue. Another man attempted to use his blade on me, but I shifted into shadows. Using the swirling black smoke, I grabbed the attacker and tore him apart, limb by limb.

Others tried to run, but they weren't quick enough. I pounced from one to another, killing each before they could get away. When the last one closest to me at the center of the valley went silent, I swiveled my head and found the king's men fleeing back to their puny camp.

No, the king's soft voice said in my head.

His protest was weak, pathetic. I'd lingered in the back of his mind for so long, watching and waiting for my freedom. Now, I would make him pay.

I'd make them all pay.

Please. It was barely more than a whisper.

I laughed at his desperation. *Not a chance, King.*

I was going to kill every last one of them. Every human who'd written me off as the villain or forgotten about me entirely. They wanted to make me the bad guy, so that was what I would be.

Launching back into the sky, I sprayed fire down on the retreating forms. They wouldn't escape me. I would destroy every soul here. Then, I would fly to the precious king's home and finish what I had started years ago.

The king's pain grew within me, but I pushed it away. It was easy enough to ignore, and after enough time, he would disappear altogether. I would not let him trap me again. The last time, I'd been too weak after attacking his people. It had been too long since I'd had a corporeal form, and when I took over the king's body, leaching into his mind, I hadn't anticipated the exhaustion.

But I was stronger now. He hadn't been able to fully push me out, and so I grew accustomed to his strength and energy. And I knew how to keep control indefinitely this time.

A faint glowing caught my attention, and I swiveled around to get a better look. There among the scared running men was a single person moving toward me.

Was someone really foolish enough to try to take me on after what they'd seen me do so far?

Idiotic, delusional, puny humans.

I landed a short distance away, making the ground tremble beneath me. Growling, I stalked closer.

As I recognized the girl, the king's consciousness stirred to life. Then, it hit me. This was *his* girl. The new woman he loved. I'd destroyed the last one, though his feelings for her didn't compare to this. Nothing in his memories or what I'd experienced through him felt like what he felt for this girl.

His strength seemed to grow as I approached the young queen. Her glowing hands only made me angrier. She was a princess from the lands in the west. That magic did not belong to her.

I knew she couldn't truly use it, however. Not enough to stop me. I'd seen her through the king's eyes, had seen her trying to learn about the

magic.

I slowly neared her, head low to the ground, fire burning in the back of my throat.

No, the king said louder than before.

I kept moving, stalking toward the only person brave enough to face me. An admirable courage. Even I could admit that. It was almost a shame that I had to end her life.

The king pushed against our mental bond. *Don't touch her!*

Oh, you really care about this one, don't you? I chuckled and came to a stop a short distance away from the glowing queen. *You know, I don't have to touch her to kill her. I could incinerate her from here without so much as lifting a claw.*

Please. I'm begging you to leave her alone.

I let out a huff of steam, and he shouted at me more. A few other men appeared behind her, but my focus was only on her. The light wielder.

It would actually be merciful if I did touch her, I said. *It would be over much quicker that way. Burning to death is painful and drawn out. Snapping her in half though…*

No! You will not *kill her. I demand you give me control.*

You demand it? I laughed at his feeble attempts. *You think* you *can command a* god*?*

You are not a god anymore. You haven't been for thousands of years. The king pushed and pulled against that bond, fighting for power. *People do not worship you. You. Are. Nothing.*

I stumbled slightly, and it was enough to realize he wouldn't give up. His love for this woman was giving him the strength to fight back.

Killing her would break him.

Don't!

It would destroy any remaining hope he had, any fight left in him.

Please!

And then, it would all be mine. I would take full control and destroy these lands that divided my family. No one would be able to stop me here in the kingdom of shadows.

Are you so far gone that you'd kill one of your own just for vengeance? another soft voice whispered to me, but I shoved it away. Just as I'd done for millennia.

Never again would I let that sweet voice into my head.

The last time I did, she cursed me as this creature and banished me from the stars. It took centuries to find a host strong enough to hold me. The others had died too quickly when I tried.

This king, however, had the strength of many. Even without a physical body, I'd wandered through the kingdom and watched it evolve. I'd known upon his birth that Bodin would be different. I could sense that he had a great destiny. I knew he would be the one.

For decades, I waited, watching him age. Then, when he was at his lowest, I made my move. I possessed him, but it had been too soon. So again, I waited for the perfect time to attack.

That time was now.

I would raze my brother's and sister's precious kingdoms to the ground.

Starting with the queen who didn't deserve my magic.

FORTY-TWO

Juniper

Facing the real Ombrete, knowing what it was capable of, might have been the stupidest thing Juniper had ever done. Her pulse pounded in her ears, and her feet felt like lead. She was fairly certain at least two of her brothers were yelling her name, possibly getting closer, but their voices blended into the disorder behind her.

Her fingers tingled as her Lumen magic came alive. Her hands glowed, but she didn't know how to direct that magic like Richard had when he'd stopped the monster from attacking in the portal.

The Ombrete crept closer, keeping low to the ground. It reminded her of a wild feline hunting its prey. Except, this creature had much sharper teeth and claws, and its dark body shifted from solid to smoke as needed.

And it breathed fire.

Steam unfurled from its mouth, billowing toward the skies. She could just make out the embers in the back of its throat waiting to ignite everything.

Sliding her dagger back into its sheath, Juniper stepped forward with her hands raised in front of her. The blade wouldn't do any good here anyway. Not when the monster could change its form to protect itself.

"Bodin?" she said in a soft tone.

The Ombrete let out a low growl.

Fear coursed through her, but a soft warmth pressed to her back. Almost like someone was encouraging her to continue. But her brothers hadn't reached her yet.

Juniper took a deep breath. She wasn't sure why the Ombrete wasn't attacking right away, but it gave her hope that her husband was still in there

somewhere and stopping it. “Bo,” she whispered. “Please come back to me.”

As if it understood, the Ombrete swayed its head from side to side. It raised its onyx eyes to look behind her, the rumble growing along with the glow in its throat.

She whipped her head around and found her three brothers and Laurent. “What are you doing? Go!”

“Not without you,” Hugo said, glaring at the monster. “Come with us, Juni. While it’s calm.”

In any other circumstance, she might have laughed at his foolishness. She couldn’t run. The moment she did, it would pounce. She was sure of that.

It wasn’t calm. It was waiting, drawing this out. Almost as if it were a game.

Turning back toward it, she said loud enough for everyone to hear, “I’m not leaving without Bodin.”

“Juniper, please,” Laurent begged, his voice cracking. “I love him too, he’s my brother, but we have to go. He wouldn’t want you to do this.”

She hated the pain in his voice, but it was nothing compared to the agony that would consume her if she didn’t get Bodin to return. Keeping her eyes on the Ombrete, she ignored her friend and brothers and took another step forward. “Give him back to me.”

It cocked its head to the side before extending its claws. Then, looking behind her once more, it leaped.

Juniper’s breath caught in her throat. Time seemed to slow as it jumped toward her, over her, going after the rest of those she loved.

“No!” she screamed, raising her hands above her.

She couldn’t fight the beast with any man-made weapon. It was impossible to pierce shadows with a blade. But like she’d told Rafe, she had the one thing that could fight darkness…

Light shot out of her palms. Her body burned brighter than it ever had as she imagined that light acting as a shield. It expanded just as she wanted it to, creating a wall before them.

Bodin had hinted that she had immense power, but never did she expect *this*.

The Ombrete hit the magic and retreated quickly, hissing in anger or pain, she wasn’t sure which. Almost like… the light harmed it.

Juniper stared at her hands as the wall faded, panting as power still thrummed through her veins. Could she actually do this?

That familiar soft breeze caressed her cheeks, blowing strands of hair out of her face. And not for the first time, she felt a connection to something beyond this world. She'd been told over and over as a child that it was her imagination, that she needed to remember what was real. The pull toward the Goddess of Unity, according to her parents and tutors, was not reality.

She'd never believed them.

And then, Bodin had given her that storybook about Ronna, Eryx, and Theran. It was kismet. There was no denying it. Somehow, it connected to their current situation. She just couldn't figure out how the pieces fit together.

Tears blurred her vision as that warmth filled her, comforting her once again.

"Ronna," she whispered.

Another wind drifted around her, and on it, she heard her name. A male voice, not the whispers of the goddess. This time when a solid hand braced her back, she turned to look at her father. The man who'd always been beside her, even before they knew the truth.

"Together," he said as the Ombrete climbed to its feet and approached again.

Juniper nodded and shifted her attention to the creature that threatened her kingdom, her people, and the king she loved more than anything, more than she ever thought possible. Lifting her hands, she focused on her magic, and she used the need to protect her family to call it forth.

The Ombrete opened its wide mouth and released a growl loud enough that they both ducked on instinct, covering their ears. And then, before they could prepare, fire burst toward them.

Richard grabbed her and dove to the side. Pain seared through her arm as flames tore through her sleeve and skin, and she cried out. He quickly stopped the fire from spreading, but the damage was done, and they didn't have time for her to heal right now. The shadow creature was moving toward them again.

Juniper got to her feet with Richard's help. Using her good arm, she pulled her light up just as the Ombrete lunged. She pushed it off course, but it managed to swipe a claw at Richard's leg. Her father fell to the ground,

shouting in agony. She looked down in horror at the now-visible bone in his calf.

Before she could even contemplate how to help him, the monster jumped once more. The only thing she could do was raise her hands in front of her.

Her breath caught in her throat as the world around her illuminated. White light glowed from her entire body, shielding both her and her father. And it made the Ombrete retreat with a screech.

She took the opportunity to turn and look for her brothers. They all appeared to be fighting an internal war. Hugo appeared like he wanted to go to her, but he was still supporting Laurent. Her brother glanced at Laurent and visibly swallowed before starting to hand him off to Del, putting her first again. But Rafe was already rushing for her, doing what he always did and coming to her rescue, not giving anyone else the opportunity.

"Help him get out of here," she said, turning to face the Ombrete again. It stumbled to its feet, almost like it was injured.

"No, that's enough." Rafe grabbed her by the arm. "We can't win here, Juni. And if Bodin is truly trapped, it's on you to help this kingdom. You're the queen; you need to be alive to save your people."

She didn't look away from the shadowy creature prowling closer.

"Juniper," Richard said, gasping. "Please."

She took a second to glance down at him right as his eyes fluttered shut. He'd passed out, either from blood loss or pain, or both. Regardless, he needed to leave this place.

Chewing on her lower lip, she debated on what to do. Her brother was right. She hadn't considered it, but if Bodin didn't return, she would be left as the sole ruler of Mesairla. There was no heir or next of kin. It was up to her to protect her people.

Except, Bodin *was* her people. And if she didn't get him to shift back into his human form, she wouldn't just be losing him. She would be risking countless others who couldn't defend themselves against the Ombrete. In the land of shadows, only light could protect them.

"Get Richard out of here so he can heal," she told her brother, lifting her chin as well as her glowing hands.

"We're not leaving you," Rafe said with steely determination. In that moment, he was every bit the crown prince he was raised to be.

But she was the queen.

And she would be damned if she lost anyone she loved today.

FORTY-THREE

Juniper

"I order you to leave," Juniper said with a grunt as the Ombrete lunged again and she blocked it with her shield of light.

Rafe ducked. "You can't order me."

"I outrank all of you here."

"I'm not one of your subjects—"

"Raphael!" She pushed her light out toward the monster as it tried to get closer. "Please go. I know you want to protect me, but I'm not a child anymore. And I'm currently the only one capable of stopping the Ombrete. The second I try to run, it will attack. So, I'm begging you to get Richard and go."

"Juni—"

"Let me be the one to protect you all, for once, while I can," she said in a quieter tone. Her strength was waning, but she didn't want him to see that or the way her arm was blistered, burnt, and causing an immense amount of pain. "Please, Rafe. I have to do this."

He hesitated for a long few seconds as she continued forcing the shadow creature back. Sighing, Rafe used one hand to brush some of her hair from her face, and she could feel his pride in his voice as he whispered, "I love you."

Her throat burned with tears as she said, "I love you too."

"The second you have an opening, get out of here." He knelt to haul Richard over his shoulder. When he stood, he paused only long enough to say, "I'll see you soon."

She nodded, but she wouldn't promise him anything. Knowing that he had that kind of faith in her gave her even more strength and resolve

though. He turned to go, and she thanked Ronna. But before he'd taken more than a few steps, she swallowed and said over her shoulder, "Rafe?"

He paused instantly. "Yeah?"

"Thank you." She hoped he understood that she meant for everything, not just for trusting her with this. He'd always looked out for her, loved her. And she knew he had a huge part in her arranged marriage.

A soft pressure touched the back of her head. Her brother silently pressing a kiss to her hair. Then, he was gone, leaving her to face the demon holding her husband captive.

Juniper clenched her jaw and stepped forward. From somewhere close, the sound of hooves beating on the ground reached her. Behind her, she heard arguing, but she couldn't pay any attention to the rider or her family right now. She had to trust that Rafe would make the others leave.

Hands outstretched, she ignored her burned arm and used all of her focus on forcing more magic at the Ombrete. Its shadowy body wavered in her light, and it continued growling in what sounded like frustration. It was still on the ground, not flying away, which made her think the dissipating shadows caused it pain.

"Give him back." She didn't know if this was hurting Bodin too, and that terrified her. If she found a way to kill the monster, what happened to her husband?

In response, it opened its mouth and spewed more fire. Juniper twisted away and tried to throw her light at it. But it didn't work. She still had no idea how to truly control this magic.

Weariness, along with the pain shooting through her arm with each movement, slowed her down. Sweat beaded on her brow as she considered how to extinguish the creature entirely. Even if she was sure it wouldn't kill Bodin too though, she wasn't strong enough. There simply wasn't enough of her light.

The hoofbeats grew louder, closer. A brilliant white light joined hers, brightening the field around them. The horse stopped, and the rider dismounted in an instant, running to her side. Juniper turned her head and let out a breath of surprise.

"Focus," the young woman demanded. She couldn't have been more than a few years older than Juniper, but she had an air of authority about her.

She also had Gilarnian colors draped over the horse now galloping back toward the other side of the battlefield. Juniper returned her gaze to the cowering Ombrete. “We can’t kill it yet.”

“Excuse me? Are you mad?” The woman sounded absolutely outraged. “It’s down and weak. This might be our only chance.”

“It’s not just a monster,” Juniper said, pleading for her to understand. “It’s… my husband is trapped within.”

“What? How?” She sounded incredulous.

Juniper narrowed her eyes, even though she couldn’t look away from the Ombrete. “Do you want the specific mechanics of how he shifted right now? Or can it wait until after we find a way to help him turn back?”

“Fine,” she said. “What’s the plan to save the king?”

At that, Juniper’s gaze snapped over to her. “How—”

“Also not important right now. What are we doing?”

Juniper returned her attention to the Ombrete. “I… don’t know.”

The woman sighed, her tone dripping with sarcasm as she muttered, “Fantastic.”

Ignoring her, Juniper combed through the information she’d learned. She thought about his story of how impossible it had been the first time and how he’d begged and pleaded with the creature to give him control after watching it kill his family. Bodin had said it was a separate entity and that he could see from inside.

She took a deep breath to steady herself.

“What are you going to do?”

“Something incredibly stupid,” she whispered. “Can you hold it back on your own?”

“Yes, but I don’t know for how long…”

“All right. Just… do the best you can.” Juniper lowered her arms. Her hands still glowed, but it wasn’t directed at the Ombrete anymore. She started moving forward, nearing the monster lying on the ground.

“What in the burning hells are you doing?” the woman hissed, her own light shining a little brighter.

Juniper ignored her. “Bo?”

The Ombrete lifted its head with a snarl, and she paused. She didn’t know how hurt it was or if it was only pretending so it could lure her into a trap. It didn’t matter though. Either way, she would take the risk if it meant saving Bodin.

“Bo,” she repeated, taking another step closer. “Please come back. Fight it… for me.”

It looked from her to the woman, who quickly expanded her light to create a ring around Juniper and the creature.

“Bodin,” Juniper whispered. “I need you.” She choked on her words. “I love you.”

The Ombrete let out a grumble.

Holding its gaze, she knelt and said, “Give him back control.”

That only seemed to make it angrier. It pushed to its feet, and she jolted upright once more. The creature was taller than her, massive compared to any animal she’d ever seen. Her mind had trouble believing it was real, despite it standing in front of her. Its hot breath swept across her as it inched closer.

“I demand you let him go,” she said in a louder voice. That old familiar breeze brushed along her face, giving her a sense of serenity and strength. The next words out of her mouth were not her own. “Theran, that is *enough*.”

Theran? The God of Light? Juniper didn’t understand what was happening. Someone or something was using her voice, infiltrating her entire body as it took over. Was this similar to what Bodin experienced? She searched for the source, trying to confirm what she suspected. In her mind, she said, *Ronna?*

Yes. Breathe, human queen, said a soft whisper in her head. *I will not let my brother harm you or your little one.*

Juniper’s eyes widened, and her hand went to her stomach. “Bodin…”

The Ombrete’s head snapped in her direction, and she knew deep in her soul that it was her husband seeing her, not the monster. She knew how much this would mean to him, especially after everything he’d been through in the past. But she also understood the fear that came with the possibility of her having a child. She’d read it firsthand in his journal that mentioned Beatrice.

“This was not our deal, brother,” Ronna said through Juniper—a terrifying sensation, but one she didn’t fight. If the goddess was here to help them, she wouldn’t dare refuse. No matter what it took. “You were never meant to attach yourself to one of them.”

Juniper gasped and fell to her knees as images flooded her mind, scenes from a past long forgotten.

“You… you killed him,” Ronna whispered, staring down at the still form on the ground. Her father had always warned her about her brothers, had tried to instill upon her the coldness with which he ruled. Time and again he told her that love was a weakness. It was beneath the gods to have such feelings.

She’d always disagreed. Love gave them strength. It gave them something to hold on to and fight for.

And yet, as she knelt beside Eryx, she couldn’t stop the tears from rolling down her cheeks. He had fought for her, protected her throughout her entire existence. She bent over her brother with a hand on his chest. His shadows were gone, his magic vanished. The only brother who ever treated her as an equal. Despite his darkness, he was full of love.

“Heal him.” She lifted her gaze to Theran. “Use your light to heal him.”

“You know it doesn’t work like that. That’s why I couldn’t help your daughter.” He reached toward her then seemed to hesitate before crossing his arms. “It’s over, Ronna. Let him go.”

She brushed her tears away and stood, shaking her head. This wasn’t acceptable. Her brothers had always warred over this world and power, and now one of them was gone forever. He couldn’t even return to the stars. Clenching her jaw, she reached for her own power. Not the strength and immortality that came from her father, which had been faint in her soul, but that from her mother. The magic she’d hidden for millennia.

For she could manipulate beings into another form, shift any sort of matter to her needs. She could create anything out of nothing. All she needed was to picture it and then the very air around her could transform. It was how she had erected mountains to separate the kingdoms, made the magical lake, and kept her kingdom safe and thriving for centuries.

“I will not let you get away with this,” she said in a steady tone. “You are done destroying those I love.”

“Because there are none left,” he whispered with a malicious curl to his lips.

She shook her head in grief and disgust. “You may have killed him, but you won’t gain control of these lands and people. The magic from you both will continue to aid those in your kingdoms, but you are done here.”

Theran scoffed. He underestimated her, just as he had her entire existence. But she wouldn’t continue this way anymore.

Neither would he.

"You hated Eryx's dark magic? Well, now it's all you will know." Ronna raised a hand in front of her, and her brother raised a brow. "You will no longer live in the light. Your physical body will cease to exist, and instead, you will be trapped among the shadows."

"Ronna—"

"Until you can accept them," she finished. "Until you can see that shadows cannot live without light, that light does not matter without darkness. Until one born of darkness and one gifted with light can prove that love is the strongest power in this world, not magic."

A flash momentarily blinded Juniper, and she was thrown back into the present, facing the god who'd taken over part of her husband's mind so long ago.

Until one born of darkness and one gifted with light can prove that love is the strongest power in this world, not magic. Juniper had been right; they were the perfect balance. They were made for each other. And they were the proof needed to end this curse once and for all.

As Juniper stood, Ronna used her voice again. "You've warped into the very creature you'd killed to extinction ten thousand years ago, Theran. But I see the struggle in you. I've had a long time to think about everything that happened, and I know you killed Eryx out of grief. That's how you latched onto this man, isn't it? He's suffered the same pain."

The Ombrete growled, but the shadows shifted and swirled.

I don't understand, Juniper thought.

"The stories told across the lands were changed," Ronna said out loud through Juniper. "Even my memory isn't accurate. I saw it differently because of my own grief and anger."

An image reappeared in her mind. This time, as Theran told her she didn't have any loved ones left, he wasn't grinning. He appeared as distraught as she felt.

"The humans wanted a fairy tale, a clear good and evil, but it is never that simple," Ronna went on. "They made Theran a villain who slayed his kin out of spite and greed, but he hadn't always been that cruel. He had loved me and Eryx, despite the wars over the world. And he'd once loved a human woman more than anything. A Mesairlan woman for whom he was prepared to give up everything."

Juniper's head spun, her eyes widening. The monster let out a low rumbling sound and stepped toward them.

The ring of light brightened around them slightly, stopping it in its tracks.

"She was unfaithful," Ronna continued. "She betrayed him… with Eryx. And then, she died of a fever shortly after giving birth to a son. They weren't sure whose child it was, but in the end, it didn't matter. He was lost to illness too."

No. Juniper clenched a hand to her chest. His tragic story was too familiar. *That's why he affixed himself to Bodin, how he took over. He understood that pain.*

Yes. He loved the boy because it was the woman's son. Because he was family, regardless of who fathered him.

He blamed Eryx for their deaths.

Juniper had been right. The storybook Bodin gave her had been connected to everything. He'd given it to her, saying he needed her opinion, but then they'd argued about coming here and got so caught up in the chaos that he never shared what he meant. Did he know it was Theran this whole time?

"I can't hold this much longer!" the Gilarnian woman shouted beyond her light.

Juniper silently pleaded to Ronna to hurry. They were running out of time. *Patience, young queen*. "Theran, let him go and I will free you from the shadows. This must end."

It huffed, steam billowing from its lips.

"You know what he has gone through," Ronna said through her. "He's lost everything, just like you did. But he found another chance, and now I'm offering one to you as well. Let me send you back to the stars."

The moment the words were out, Juniper knew it was the wrong thing to say. If this truly was the God of Light, who'd killed his own brother, as well as his sister's family, he wouldn't be content leaving this world that he'd fought so long to control.

Another lie in the stories. He didn't touch my family. Time, illness, and war took them from me.

Juniper's heart broke. Theran hadn't killed them. People made him a villain to fit their stories.

Just like they'd done to Bodin.

Just like they'd spread false stories about her.

The Ombrete's stance changed; it reared up as if preparing to attack. Juniper could practically feel the rage emanating from it. And she understood why now.

Swallowing, she took a step back. Fear coursed through her when it stood to its full height.

"I love you, Bo," she whispered as the creature opened its fanged mouth. The glowing embers brightened in its throat, and she wrapped her arms around her stomach and squeezed her eyes shut just as heat enveloped her.

FORTY-FOUR

Bodin

Bodin had faced horror many times in his life.

He'd seen his first wife die after giving birth to their son, who never took his first breath.

He'd watched as the creature he had become killed his second wife, parents, and dozens of others.

He'd seen war ravage his kingdom, men tearing each other apart for a cause most probably didn't even believe in.

Yet, nothing compared to being a helpless witness as the woman he loved more than anything faced death. He'd watched her realize the truth of what was about to happen, and then she'd wrapped her arms around her stomach, around the precious gift he was to lose again. She'd closed her eyes as the Ombrete prepared to incinerate her.

The last thing Bodin remembered was him screaming in the monster's mind, pounding with invisible fists against whatever kept him trapped. He pleaded, cried, and made promises.

And then, it all went black again.

At least there had been *some* mercy. He hadn't seen Juniper die with his own eyes.

Bodin blinked them open now. Somehow, he had survived when no one else did. And now that he had nothing to fight for, he didn't think he would ever make it back to his human form.

He took a deep breath and furrowed his brow, not understanding what he was seeing above him.

A breath… He'd taken a breath.

Slowly, he lifted his hands. A sob escaped his lips. What kind of horrid torture was this? He *had* shifted out of the Ombrete? After it was too late. What was even the point now? Almost everyone he cared about was dead. Juniper, Laurent, Richard, probably the princes. They had been with her near the end, but he'd burned hordes of soldiers. He knew the odds of them surviving.

Ronna had taken control of his wife; he knew that much. She must have forced the change on him after it was over. After all, that was her power. *The magic I gifted you to create a place to hold my brother until it was time for him to emerge again*, a soft voice whispered in his mind.

It didn't surprise him nearly as much as it probably should have to hear the goddess. After all, he'd lived with the God of Light in his head for six years.

The magic you still possess that will help your people heal and rebuild —and help yourself through the days of guilt and sorrow. For everything you have endured.

He could only hope she'd made Juniper's death painless. The thought made him sick.

Why didn't you stop Theran sooner? Why didn't you save June? he asked the goddess.

When she didn't respond, he sat up with a wince. His entire body ached, but he seemed to be on a cot in a tent. "What the…"

"Bodin?"

The soft voice brought instant tears to his eyes. Perhaps he hadn't shifted after all. Either he was dead, or this was a dream. His chest heaved as he turned to find Juniper getting out of a chair to kneel beside his makeshift bed.

Bodin brushed his fingers along her cheek. "June."

"Hi," she whispered with a half-sob, half-laugh of relief. Her eyes were lined with tears as well. But her smile took away his pain and brightened the space around them.

He reached for her, needing her closer. She didn't hesitate to climb up onto his lap and bury her face against the side of his neck. Wrapping his arms around her, he cried with her. "Please don't let me wake from this dream."

"Bo, this isn't a dream." Juniper leaned back to meet his gaze.

“We’re…” He couldn’t bring himself to say it. “I knew I’d find you in whatever was after life.”

Sympathy filled her green eyes. “We’re not dead, Bo.”

Shaking his head in confusion, he whispered, “But the Ombrete, Theran… he killed you with his fire.”

“No, he didn’t. He tried, but I had help in blocking the flames.” She took his hand and placed it over her heart.

Her beating heart.

“You’re alive?” He was too afraid to believe it. When she nodded, he whispered, “How?”

But before she could even answer, he covered her mouth with his. Bodin held her close, kissing her as thoroughly as he could. He didn’t care how. The only thing that mattered was that she was here. They both were.

“Ronna protected me,” she said, breaking the kiss. “*Us.*”

Then, he remembered. He looked down at her stomach between them, his pulse racing again. This time for an entirely different reason. It was fear, yes, but also joy. More tears blurred his vision as he lowered a hand to her abdomen. “It’s true?”

“It’s too early to really know, but I trust the goddess.”

He smiled and met her gaze. His lips trembled though. If anything happened to her…

As if reading his mind, she put a palm against his cheek. “I’ll be all right. It won’t be like with Camille. I have Lumen magic to heal, as does Richard.”

“Richard is alive? I thought he fell.”

“He did. Twice. But he’s been resting and regaining his strength. He’s also been using his magic to help with other injuries.” She seemed to hesitate before adding, “Alongside our new friend.”

Bodin took a deep breath. “Start from the beginning. How long have I been unconscious? What happened to the Ombrete? How did you…” He reached into his mind, searching. “It’s gone.”

“It’s been about a day and a half. Richard healed you, but you wouldn’t wake…”

He kissed her again, understanding how difficult that must have been for her. “I’m here. We *both* are.”

Juniper nodded and lowered her hand to his. “The new friend I mentioned has extremely powerful Lumen magic. She is the one who

encircled us while I approached, and she… Ronna separated you and Theran when it made to attack that final time, and our friend extinguished his shadows."

"She killed it?" He couldn't believe it, not after so many years of trying to find a way to be free of the monster. Years of being tormented by the guilt and fear that came with knowing it lived inside him.

Juniper shook her head. "Not entirely. She destroyed his physical body, and while he was weak, Ronna disappeared with him back to the stars."

Theran. Ronna. They'd been at the center of this battle among gods and managed survived. "It's over?"

"Yes," she said with a soft smile. She brushed a kiss against the corner of his mouth. "It's over."

He nodded, more to himself than her. The fight with the Ombrete was done, but he still had a war and a kingdom to consider. His body was drained though. He wasn't sure he had it in him to even stand.

"Did you know it was Theran?" she asked a moment later.

"Not in the beginning." Bodin sighed. "It wasn't until more recently that I began to form that theory. That first week after we were married, you mentioned during one of our late-night chats how you had always felt Ronna's presence with you. It made me think of that book I loved as a child, and I went back to reread it. Specifically, the part about her banishing him to the shadows. I… wasn't absolutely certain, but it was a theory. That's why I gave you the book. I wondered if you would see the connection or if I had made it up in my head."

Juniper lifted a palm to his cheek. "I'm so sorry, Bo. You never should have been caught up in this."

"Neither should you." He gave a small grin. "But this means I was right. You, my dear wife," he tapped the end of her nose, "are my soulmate. The goddess brought us together, and our love ended this darkness."

She kissed him again. And again. He never wanted her to stop.

Though, eventually she did. But Bodin reminded himself they had more time now. At least until Gilarn attacked again.

When she rested her head against his shoulder once more, he ran a hand along her braided hair and asked, "Now, who's this friend you met? A Gilarnian, I assume."

"Iliana," a new voice said.

Juniper pulled away enough to sit beside him, but Bodin didn't let her get far, needing her close while also wanting to protect her from this potential new threat… He wanted to shove her behind him, but knew that wasn't a possibility at the moment with how he felt. Still, he looked for his sword.

"I'm not here to hurt you or your wife," the woman—Iliana—said, lifting her empty hands in front of her. "I'm unarmed, and you know Lumen magic cannot harm anyone."

"How did you get here?" he asked in a harsh tone.

Iliana strode to the chair Juniper had occupied when he first woke. "On a horse, Your Majesty."

Bodin scowled.

She crossed her legs, drawing attention to the fact that she wore fighting leathers, not a dress or even armor. Her fierce demeanor reminded him that those in the north often raised their daughters to be warriors. She also reminded him of someone, but he couldn't put his finger on who. Her nearly white-blond hair was braided back on one side in tight, small twists, with the rest flowing down the opposite side, and kohl lined her eyes. She was beautiful, and she knew it. She had that cocky, arrogant air about her. "I was already trying to figure out a way to get here. Then, I saw your queen facing you alone and admired her obvious strength and bravery. When it was clear that she was struggling with her own Lumen magic, I couldn't just stand by."

He didn't understand. Before he could ask more, the tent flap opened and Prince Delroy stormed in.

"We told you to wait," he shouted at Iliana. "We ordered you—"

"I don't follow your orders, Prince," she said with a sneer, pushing to her feet.

Bodin was stuck on one word though. "*We*?"

Sure enough, a second later, Rafe entered as well. Bodin let out a breath of relief. At least two of June's brothers had lived. Rafe nodded toward him. "Glad to have you back."

"I still don't understand *how* I'm back." He looked at the young woman still glaring at the younger prince. "Why would *you* help us?"

Did they know who she was?

"I got your letter." Iliana turned toward him, giving Del her back. "Besides, I wasn't just helping you. I saw the destruction that monster was

creating, and I knew eventually it would come for my people too. So, I was trying to rally up a defense, finding a way to fight it when your wife went for it on her own. I didn't realize she was the queen until I got close enough to speak to her…"

June curled up against his side more, and he kissed the top of her head. He would yell at her later for being so reckless.

"I thought saving you and your queen might go a long way in discussing those negotiations you mentioned," Iliana said.

"The letter actually made it?" he asked, looking from one person to the next. They each nodded, likely already having heard her explanation.

"You were right. We didn't want this war." Iliana crossed her arms, looking every bit the warrior princess she was raised to be.

"My father started it after my brother was killed by who he thought was a Gilarnian assassin," he admitted.

"I know," she said. "*My father* repeatedly told him it wasn't our doing."

For so long, he'd blamed himself for Elias's death. For the fact that as the crown prince he'd been the target, but his brother had paid the price. He thought about what they'd lost over the years, those who'd been lost just today, and his heart ached. *Laurent*. His best friend was gone.

Bodin nodded. "I've since learned the truth, that it was Umbra, not Gilarn. But even before that, I wanted to end the fighting. I still want to end it."

Iliana's clear irritation faded as she sighed. "As would I."

Bodin believed her. Maybe it was naïve, maybe it was simply out of hope, but if it led to peace, he would accept this story. "Well then, what did you have in mind, Princess?"

She smirked and took a seat once more. No one else appeared shocked at her identity, so perhaps she'd already revealed that to them as well.

"An armistice to begin with," she said. "The fighting stopped when your monster attacked, but I don't want it to start again."

"Agreed. Then, a treaty?" He needed to find out which of his commanders and advisors made it out alive. That only made him think about Laurent again. Swallowing past the tightness in his throat, he looked at Rafe. "Is Moreau alive?"

"Yes, he's currently overseeing everything with the help of a few others," the prince said. "Hugo and Laurent are with him, Samuel, Thomas—"

“Laurent?” His pulse thundered in his ears. He didn’t hear Rafe’s response, but he saw the man nod. Ignoring the rest of them, he stood from the cot using what little strength he had and stumbled out of the tent into the dim evening light. Juniper followed, grabbing him when he nearly fell, putting his arm over her shoulder while she wrapped hers around his waist. He twisted this way and that, searching.

“Over here,” Rafe said as he joined them and led them through the maze, obviously understanding where he needed to go, who he needed to see.

Three rows away, they turned, and Bodin stilled. Laurent was there, standing with Hugo as they talked to a handful of soldiers. As if sensing him, Laurent lifted his eyes and met Bodin’s gaze. The moment he started grinning, Bodin almost collapsed with relief. Instead, he removed his arm from June and walked over to them as quickly as he could manage, interrupting their conversation by yanking his friend into his arms. His brother in all the ways that mattered.

He didn’t care what the others thought. “You were dead.”

“Nah, takes more than a little sword to kill me,” Laurent said with a chuckle, holding him just as tightly. They stepped apart only for him to pull June into his arms, a surprised laugh leaving her as he did. “Your wife saved me. Told you she loved me more.”

Bodin laughed, shaking his head.

“She gets all the credit?” Hugo asked. The other soldiers dispersed, giving them a little privacy. “I literally jumped in front of a blade for you and then carried your bleeding ass away from the battle.”

“Fine, you’re my hero, Prince Hugo. My savior,” Laurent deadpanned. “How ever shall I thank you?” Rolling his eyes, he said in a normal tone, “Your sister used actual magic to heal me. Magic she didn’t even know how to use, I might add. It was her love that saved me.”

Juniper snorted and pushed away from him. “Stop. Both of you.”

Her words said one thing, but her smile said another. Especially when it widened as Richard appeared. And Bodin knew it was the same thing he was thinking. Drawing her into a hug, he tilted her chin up and kissed her before whispering, “We made it.”

They had lost so many men and women, and he would feel that guilt for the rest of his days, but he would do everything in his power to rebuild this kingdom in a new, peaceful era. For now, he thanked the goddess for

protecting his family. For ensuring a future with his incredible wife and their future child.

FORTY-FIVE

Juniper

4 MONTHS LATER…

Wringing her hands together, Juniper tapped her foot repeatedly on the marble floor. Someone cleared their throat—Rafe, she thought—but she couldn't stop staring at the empty chair across from her. Until Bodin's large, comforting hand landed on her knee and gently squeezed. She met his gaze, and he mouthed, *breathe.* Taking a deep inhale, she nodded and put a hand over his. He turned it to entwine their fingers.

She couldn't help but be nervous. Today was huge.

"Sunshine," Bodin whispered as he leaned in close to her ear. "It's going to be all right. The treaty is already agreed upon; this is just a formality and signing." He kissed the side of her neck, right on the spot he knew made her shiver, causing her to do just that and him to grin.

Juniper nodded and said, "I know. It's just… strange being here."

Her husband chuckled. "Agreed. You have to admit though," he glanced around the brilliant ballroom they'd been brought to for the meeting, "it's quite beautiful."

"Breathtaking," she admitted, tilting her head back to look at the crystal chandeliers hanging from the vaulted glass ceiling. The sun reflected off the crystals, creating rainbows across the sand-colored marble pillars and floor. At one end of the room, four thrones sat upon a raised dais, the two at the center tall and ornately carved out of white stone. The two on either side were smaller and set back a little, made for their princesses. On the opposite

end of the room were towering double doors made of dark wood that contrasted with the rest.

The doors that now opened, letting in the King of Gilarn and his eldest daughter, Princess Iliana.

Bodin pushed to his feet and helped Juniper up as the rest of their party also stood. The king inclined his head, his smile warm but wary. “Had I known your condition, I wouldn’t have insisted we meet here, Your Majesty.”

Juniper shook her head, putting a hand on her small round belly. But it was Iliana who said under her breath, “I told you she was with child.”

Her father’s jaw clenched. “Yes, but I had not realized she was so far along.”

“It’s fine,” Juniper cut in before the princess could argue on her behalf. Since the battlefield, the two had become more acquainted, writing often to find a way to stop this war. Iliana had visited their home multiple times, always with the excuse that they needed to work on the treaty. Though, she usually stayed for several days, most of which were spent with Juniper and Nadine. The three had grown to be close friends.

King Dag nodded once more and indicated for everyone to sit. Along with him and his daughter were a couple of councilors and a dozen guards who stood behind them. Bodin guided Juniper into her seat before taking his own. They also had a few people with them to serve as advisors—Laurent, Moreau, and Richard. Her father still acted as her guard from day to day, but Bodin had given him a formal title and position as an advisor. They had kept his relation to her a secret, however. For the time being, they thought it best. After ending one war, they didn’t want to face another king’s wrath just yet.

Eventually, Samuel would take over as her head guard. But convincing Richard that it was for the best wasn’t going to be easy.

Rafe, Hugo, and Delroy had accompanied them as well. Since they had been a part of that final battle, everyone agreed that a representative of each kingdom should be present. That meant Rafe, but where he went, Hugo and Del did too. Though, she suspected Hugo had other reasons to visit her as often as he did.

She glanced to where he sat next to Laurent as Bodin made introductions. The two weren’t speaking again, and the tension between them was palpable. Bodin had let it slip one night that he caught Laurent

slipping out of Hugo's tent that morning, and she had her suspicions they were sneaking around for a while after that too. But something happened recently to put an end to their semi-friendly banter.

Hugo still wouldn't tell her what it was, and Laurent was clueless as to why he was so mad. Naturally, that just made Laurent pester him more, trying to get under his skin.

He leaned over to whisper something, and Hugo's cheeks reddened, even as he scowled and glanced away. Her brother's eyes widened a fraction when he caught her watching them before he cleared his throat and lowered his gaze to the table. Laurent turned to see what he'd been looking at and chuckled when he saw Juniper staring. He gave his usual smirk and wink.

Juniper shifted her attention back to the royals seated across from them. A councilor withdrew two scrolls from a bag—one for each kingdom to have. The reason they were here. The treaties were unrolled and checked for consistency. Everything was the same, both calling for peace.

Quills and ink were already on the table when they had arrived. Each king took one and prepared to sign, but King Dag paused. He glanced at his daughter. "There is another matter to discuss before I do this."

Juniper's brow crinkled in the center.

"Forosse and Mesairla are aligned through marriage," he started. "You do not have any siblings or heirs, Bodin, but I think it only fair that we have an equal alliance."

"You wish to marry someone from Forosse?"

The king didn't answer. Instead, he looked farther down the table and said, "Prince Hugo."

Juniper's eyes snapped over to her brother. His jaw dropped a little, the color draining from his face. Beside him, Laurent visibly tensed.

"You are closest in age to my daughter, and you are unwed, correct?" the king asked, making Juniper turn to her friend. Iliana appeared as stoic as ever, but Juniper knew her well enough by now to see the concern she fought to hide. After all, she had pointed out how much time Hugo and Laurent seemed to spend together during one of her visits. She had clearly picked up on the fact that more was going on between them.

"I am, Your Majesty," Hugo said in a tone Juniper had never heard him use before. Something like resigned grief.

Juniper shook her head, unable to let him do this; he'd already sacrificed so much. "We are honored by your selection, but—"

"I'll do it," another voice cut in.

To her immense surprise, it was Delroy speaking up, not Hugo, or even Rafe. Everyone stared at him as he stood and bowed his head.

"I am a bit older than Hugo, but as second born to the throne, it is my duty to accept such arrangements," Delroy said.

Iliana opened her mouth to argue. Just as she did whenever the two were in the same room. "Prince Delroy—"

But he interrupted again, putting a hand on his younger brother's shoulder. "Besides, I believe my brother is already spoken for."

At that, Iliana's glare softened. Hugo's face flushed again, and his jaw clenched, but he didn't argue. To save Hugo from marrying a woman he would never love or be interested in for more than friendship, Juniper knew the princess would accept the man she could barely tolerate. Iliana nodded toward Delroy in silent agreement. They might hate each other, but they both cared for Hugo too much to let him do this, Iliana having become friends with him too during her many stays in Kehlir.

"Then, it's settled," the king said. "I wanted to at least open the discussion before signing the treaty." Looking at Bodin, who'd remained silent throughout all of this, he smiled. "Let us end this godsforsaken war."

Bodin dipped his quill into the inkpot and signed his name to each piece of parchment without hesitation. While the other king went to add his signature, Bodin angled toward Juniper and took her hand once more. Under his breath, he whispered, "We did it."

Juniper leaned into his side. The treaties were signed, Bodin and King Dag shook hands, and then the latter excused himself. His councilors followed him, but Iliana stayed behind. She waited for the large doors to close before standing with a sigh. "I can show you to your rooms if you'd like to rest until dinner."

A unity feast in honor of the treaties would take place tomorrow, so they planned to head home a couple of days after that. While Juniper loved getting to see her friend and visit this kingdom, she couldn't wait to be home again. She missed her bed. It had taken nearly two weeks to travel here because of their multiple stops. That long in carriages and on a ship in the middle of winter while pregnant was not fun.

Iliana led them upstairs to the guest wing, where rooms had been prepared for them. Delroy went into his without a word to his new fiancée. Rafe shook his head and apologized before going in after him.

"Thank you," Hugo whispered, putting a hand on her arm.

The princess nodded. "No one should be forced to marry or pretend to be something they're not."

With a look toward Laurent that seemed almost involuntary, his throat bobbed. Then, he focused on Juniper. "You shouldn't have been forced to—"

"Stop," she said, interrupting him. Erasing the distance between them, she hugged her brother. "You did it to set me free, and it worked out in the end." She pivoted to see Bodin. "I kind of like my husband."

Hugo and Laurent both laughed, even Richard let out a soft chuckle. Bodin simply shook his head with a smile.

Putting a hand on her stomach, Laurent asked, "Are you sure this is his? After our torrid affair—ow!" he yelled when Hugo smacked the back of his head.

"Don't even joke about that," her brother said in a harsh tone.

"People might think you're serious." Bodin stepped closer. "We can't have rumors spreading about the legitimacy of our heir."

"Fine, but why did *you* hit me?" he asked Hugo. "You know I'm just teasing them."

Hugo crossed his arms. "It's not funny."

Laurent narrowed his eyes, then his lips started to curl up.

"Don't start," Hugo said, heading toward Del's door too.

"Sorry, Juni, my love," Laurent said with a sigh. "It seems our love affair may need to end. Someone is jealous, and you know he's even more of a miserable ass to be around when angry."

"Fuck off." Hugo went into the room and slammed the door behind him.

Juniper startled. She hated that they were like this now. For a short time, the two had seemed happy. And the goddess knew Hugo deserved that after everything he'd endured over the years. They all did.

Laurent—upbeat, sarcastic Laurent—lowered his head. It was the most solemn she'd ever seen him. Slowly, she reached out and took his hand. When he didn't look up, she stepped closer and whispered, "Just give him time."

Her best friend shook his head. “I don’t even know what happened, that’s the worst part.”

“I’ll talk to him again.”

With a sigh, he gave her a side hug. “Thank you.”

Her heart broke as he walked away, but he paused at the door and turned to face them. As if trying to lighten the mood, the corner of his mouth lifted and he said, “Remember, I’m on the other side of that wall. Try to keep things down please.”

“Oh gods,” Juniper whispered, turning toward their own room. “Please stop.”

“I’m just saying, don’t scare off poor Kristoff again.”

Before either could respond, he disappeared into his room.

Cheeks on fire, Juniper looked around at the remaining people in the hallway.

After a moment, Richard cleared his throat and said, “Get some rest.” He patted Bodin on the arm and kissed her forehead. “I’ll be down the hall. Kristoff and Samuel will be on duty though.”

He nodded toward the two guards then left the three royals alone in the hallway.

FORTY-SIX

Juniper

Juniper went into the guest room assigned to her and Bodin. She collapsed onto the settee near the warm fire burning in the hearth. Bodin chuckled softly and moved to stand behind her. As he began kneading her shoulders, Iliana sat in an armchair with a groan.

"You're really going to marry my brother?" Juniper asked.

"Apparently." Her friend—future sister-in-law—slumped down in her seat, tilting her head to rest against the back. "I wouldn't have agreed if Hugo had been the only option, but I hadn't thought Delroy would step in like that. Honestly, I was hoping Rafe would."

Juniper shook her head. Iliana was constantly commenting on how attractive she found Rafe. Honestly, Juniper could no longer tell if she meant it or if she was just teasing. It was why Iliana and Laurent had hit it off so well in the beginning. Though, where Laurent was open and bubbly, she was more subdued and serious, quieter.

At least, until Delroy was around. They brought out the worst in each other, it seemed. Juniper had no idea how this marriage would work when they couldn't be in the same room for more than a few minutes without arguing. She knew the only reason they'd remained civil in the throne room earlier was because they hadn't actually talked to one another.

King Dag presence might have also contributed.

Bodin moved to sit beside Juniper. He wrapped an arm around her waist, and she leaned into him with a contented sigh.

"It will be fine," Iliana said. "Maybe it will be a marriage in name only. He can stay in Forosse for all I care."

"And future heirs?" Bodin asked.

Iliana lifted her head, but her face paled. “I… will figure that out later.” She straightened her back and shoulders. “He’s not hideous, I suppose. So, if I can just get him not to talk, it would be… tolerable.”

Juniper pinched her lips, trying not to laugh. She failed when she met Iliana’s questioning gaze. “Del? Quiet? Should that day come, it will surely be a sign of the world ending.”

“Fair enough,” Iliana said with her own laugh. Sighing, she pushed to her feet. “All right, I’m going to go talk to my sister and leave you two to rest before dinner.” She headed toward the door but glanced over her shoulder. “And by rest, I mean practice for baby number two since you likely didn’t have privacy the entire trip here.”

“This is why you’re our favorite,” Bodin called after her as she made her way out to the hall.

They had stopped at multiple inns along the way, but between the thin walls and being surrounded by her brothers and father, it was difficult to be together. It had made things interesting though, trying to stay quiet, especially on the road, but they had made it work.

Crossing the lake on one of Gilarn’s ships was the only time they didn’t need to truly worry. Which was good because something about being pregnant made her want him more than ever.

Her favorite little tryst was when they’d stopped in a meadow to eat and stretch their legs, and she’d asked Bodin to go with her into the woods so she could relieve herself. Instead, he’d quickly taken her behind a tree.

There was also the time he’d insisted they had the carriage to themselves for the afternoon and he’d knelt before her, lifted her skirts, and made her come undone with only his tongue and fingers.

The memory alone was making her hot. Biting her lip, she turned toward her husband.

He smirked, as if reading her mind. “Here or the bed?”

“Bed,” she said with a grin.

She started to stand when he did, but instead, he scooped her into his arms. He carried her to the bed and set her on her feet beside it. In record speed, he had their clothes on the floor and her lying on the softest mattress she’d felt in weeks.

Closing her eyes, she curled up on her side and said, “Oh gods. I could just go to sleep right now.”

His lips brushed along the back of her neck then lower to her side and growing stomach. “Don’t you dare.”

She rolled over with a smile. He lifted himself to hover over her, careful not to put his weight on the baby. He kissed her, running his fingers along her curves. The bump was starting to get in the way though. Seeming to know what she was thinking once again, he pushed himself to sit with his back to the headboard, grabbed a blanket, then helped her move toward him. Sitting between his legs, facing away from him, she leaned against his chest and spread the blanket over them both. He wrapped an arm around her, putting one hand on her belly. The other played with her hair.

His fingers trailed across her stomach. It hadn’t seemed real until the bump appeared a few weeks ago. That was when Bodin’s panic set in. She’d reassured him over and over that she and the baby would be fine, but Bodin still worried. Understandably. She couldn’t imagine experiencing that sort of trauma. But she would continue trying to comfort him. It helped that she kept practicing with her magic and could now show him how capable she was of healing not only other people but herself. Physically seeing her do that seemed to ease his mind. Not to mention Richard would be close during the birth. If anything happened, he would be there to help with his Lumen power too.

Turning her head to hold his gaze, she let out a breath. “It’s hard to believe that less than half a year ago, I was living as a prisoner in my own home, scared of my magic, and utterly alone in the world.”

“I know,” he whispered, pressing his lips to the side of her head. “I wasn’t locked up, but I was trapped in darkness. I never thought I’d have a chance at happiness and love again. But you…” He cleared his throat. “You are my light, Juniper. You saved me in so many ways. More ways than I can ever explain.”

Juniper didn’t know how to express the countless ways he’d saved her too. She’d been born of light but lived in the shadows until he freed her from the invisible chains. Even if he did so inadvertently. They had both gone through so much, simply surviving long enough for them to be brought together.

Light.

Dark.

They balanced each other out. And they would continue to spread that unity throughout the realm as they helped it heal.

She wasn't naïve enough to think the fighting would end entirely. The war over the Valley of Stars had started and stopped too many times throughout history to believe they had finally finished it for good.

But for now, she would hold on to the hope that she and Bodin could bring their son or daughter into a more peaceful world. After all, the goddess herself had aided them. Their heir was blessed—of that, she had no doubt.

Which brought up the more concerning issue. They didn't know if the baby would have magic. With both of them being so powerful, thanks to Ronna's gifts, it was hard to believe it wouldn't be passed down. But would the baby have Lumen or Noxian magic? For months, they'd been searching for any accounts of people being born with both, but they hadn't found answers yet.

There was plenty of time for that though. They could deal with it if it became an issue in the future. Right now, she just wanted to enjoy this calm moment with Bodin and be grateful they would get that future at all.

"I love you, Bo." She twisted enough to kiss her husband—the one she hadn't wanted at first—and then turned to put her back to him once more.

His lips brushed the curve of her neck as his hand trailed down to her hip, her inner thigh, then lower. "I love you too, Juniper."

He ignited the fire that blazed solely for him. As his fingers worked their own sort of magic, she gasped and slid her butt forward to lean back, giving him better access. Behind her, he hardened. She was already wet and didn't want to wait. "More," she said, straightening.

He chuckled, nipping at her ear. "So impatient."

Turning around, she straddled his lap, raising up on her knees. He lined up with her entrance, and she lowered slowly. She moaned in delight as he filled her. Once their bodies were joined completely, she stilled.

Bodin stared at her with the sweetest smile, and Juniper traced the scars cutting through the side of his face. Releasing her leg, he cupped her cheek and kissed her slowly. As if they had all the time in the world. Because they did now. He broke away enough to meet her gaze with his dark eyes. Stroking the side of her face with his thumb, he whispered, "For the rest of my days, and an eternity after, I will be grateful you were brought into my life, my beautiful, selfless queen. I once promised your brother that you would be free with me, but I'm swearing to *you* now that I will do

everything in my power to ensure you never feel trapped again. That I will do everything within my power, and then some, to make you happy."

Gods above, she loved this man.

"Thank you." She kissed him again and again, and then she decided it was time to lighten the mood. With a chuckle, she wiggled against him and said, "But please don't talk about my brother while we're like this."

His laughter vibrated against her. He nipped at her earlobe again and wrapped a hand around the base of her neck. In her ear, he asked, "Must you always ruin my moments?"

"Yes." Juniper grinned, reminded of similar words she'd spoken the night they'd finally consummated this marriage. She put her own hand over his, holding it in place, loving how he managed to take control without making her feel helpless. On the contrary, the way he worshiped her body made her feel like a goddess herself, full of power and grace. As she began moving, she said, "And it seems you'll be stuck with me doing so for a long time. Because you love me."

"Forever, Sunshine," he whispered before showing her just how much he meant it.

Epiloque

BODIN

2.5 years later…

Opening the portal door, Bodin took a deep breath. He'd wanted to come earlier with Juniper and the others, but one of the noblemen had cornered him to ask about crop taxes, which led to concerns about prices and food shortages this winter. What should have been a few minutes of conversation lasted for hours as he walked through Kehlir to ensure his people everything would be fine.

Now, he was exhausted and just wanted to fall into bed. He'd promised this day to June though. It meant too much to her—and to him—to change their plans.

When he and June realized Ronna had let him keep his portal magic, June came to him with a brilliant idea. She had suggested creating healthy fields within one of the portals that could supply people with what they needed if there wasn't enough. He immediately went to work on it. If he could help their people in this way, he would. He wasn't going to waste this gift.

He still wanted to keep it a secret for the most part. Because he could feel when people were in them, he didn't want to simply open them to everyone. It was overwhelming with too many at once. Plus, he wasn't sure what would happen if he were to die or suddenly lose his magic. There was

no way of knowing if these places would stay, and he didn't want to risk anyone winking out of existence or getting trapped.

In the end, he'd shared the truth with only his advisors and other trusted staff so that they could help share the resources across the kingdom. They had even sent goods to Forosse and Gilarn a few times. It was exhausting to recreate and regrow everything, but Bodin could manage it enough to make a difference.

Sounds of laughter and music welcomed him as he made his way down the fictitious streets of Nortussa. As soon as he found his family, the weariness fled his body, replaced with wonder. He paused on the corner, in the shadows of an empty building, to watch. June twirled under Hugo's arm. He tugged her around, laughing and moving along with the upbeat melody coming from enchanted, invisible instruments. They had invited their family, closest friends, and trusted staff to celebrate with them today. A handful of people danced in the street while more chatted near the tables covered in delicious foods that were popular in Forosse. Bodin crept closer, using his own dark magic to stay concealed, wanting to surprise his wife and friends.

He stopped by one of the dessert tables. From the other side, little fingers blindly reached up, searching for sweets. Bodin had to cover his mouth to keep from laughing. Laurent appeared and scooped up Elias, tickling the little boy's stomach. "What are you doing over here?"

Elias screeched in laughter, his cheeks turning red as he tried to squirm away from his uncle. Laurent stopped and narrowed his eyes. "Hmmm…" He shifted the boy to hold in one arm as he glanced around. It became clear a moment later that he was checking to make sure he wasn't caught when he grabbed a chocolate, bit off half, and then gave the rest to the toddler. "Don't tell."

Stepping out of the shadows, Bodin cleared his throat.

Laurent merely grinned with a shrug. "I knew you were there."

"Liar." He rounded the table.

Elias grinned and held out his arms toward him. "Papa."

"Hi." Bodin took his son then grabbed a cloth napkin from the table. Cleaning his chocolate-covered mouth, he asked, "Are you having fun?"

The young prince nodded before pointing to the table. "More."

Sighing, he said, "Fine, one more."

As Bodin reached for a small square piece of cake, another voice said, “You didn’t even *try* to tell him no.”

Bodin gave a bite to Elias then held the rest so he wouldn’t shove the whole thing in his mouth at once. Grinning, he turned to face his wife. “It’s a celebration. Let him have the good stuff.”

Shaking her head, Juniper stepped closer, clearly fighting a smile of her own. “Fine, but when he’s running up and down the street from the sugar, you’re in charge of chasing him.”

“Laurent started it, so I think he’s on baby duty tonight.” Bodin leaned over to kiss her cheek. “Happy Unity Day and anniversary, Sunshine.”

Laurent laughed. “You know Uncle Laurent would love to, but…” He glanced toward their family and friends huddled across the street. A few of them were splitting off to join the dancers. Including a certain prince. “I think I’m being summoned to dance, so I can’t.”

Apparently, they were talking again this week. Bodin couldn’t keep up with their back and forth. It had been a long couple of years.

Laurent whirled around before either could stop them. They stared after him, both shaking their heads. Bodin gave Elias the other half of his cake bite and then draped an arm over June’s shoulders.

“How are *they* doing?” he asked, pointing a finger to where Iliana completely ignored Delroy with her back angled to him while talking to Nadine. The official betrothal agreement had been signed, but she had managed to convince her father not to make them wed right away. King Dag had agreed on three years to give them time to get to know one another and grow used to the idea.

But that time was almost up, and they had spent most of it avoiding each other as much as possible. The two visited here often, sometimes in the same duration, but they managed to ignore each other a lot. And when they didn’t, they were arguing. Bodin didn’t even fully understand what caused their hatred.

“She doesn’t want to get married to him,” June said when he asked her about it. “She thinks that he’ll smother her, trap her into a life she has no desire for—where she’s the dutiful wife who sits by and only takes care of the children, despite being the heir to the throne. She thinks Del will be named king instead of consort, and then all the power will go to him.”

Ah, that made sense. Iliana was a warrior, a fighter. That was why she’d been out on that battlefield so long ago. It was no surprise that she didn’t

want a calmer lifestyle with a man raised in a kingdom that thought so little of women. In the years since that final battle, Bodin had come to know Del better, however, and he didn't think the prince would treat her the same. None of June's brothers seemed to agree with their kingdom's ways—likely because of how their own mother's life had gone before her death. Not to mention their sister's imprisonment before she moved here.

"I think there's also some sort of pissing contest going on," Juniper went on. "He's always been the best swordsman around. She claims to be better, which he hates, but he won't spar with her to find out."

"Stubborn a—"

"Butt." Juniper smacked his stomach playfully with a pointed look at their son.

"More," Elias said, oblivious as he looked at the desserts.

"No more," she said, laughing.

Richard joined them at the table just when the toddler started to cry. Seeing his grandfather, Elias all but jumped out of Bodin's arms toward the man.

Laughing, Richard lifted his hands to take him. "What's the matter, little prince?"

Their son pointed at the table and mumbled, "More chocolate."

Though, he was missing a couple of letters there in the middle, so it sounded like, "Mow choc-yet."

To his credit, Richard nodded and went along with it. Since finding out the truth of their relationship, he'd really stepped up as a father for June. And when Elias was born, he was there, standing at the head of the bed, next to Bodin. He'd cried seeing the baby. Everyone had.

Bodin had been terrified, and he knew his father-in-law had been there for him just as much as June and the baby. They really had become a family. One filled with both blood relatives and friends. Hugo lived with them now, he and Juni more than making up for the time they'd lost. They were now closer than ever. Rafe visited more often than not, staying for as long as he could get away with. A few of June's other brothers had come to visit as well.

But most importantly, her mother had been here. She came after they returned from the final battle and things settled a little. They had sat together in June's favorite nook on the river for an entire day, talking, crying, and holding each other. Her mother had apologized countless times,

explaining her reasons for it all, but Juniper already knew the truth. Everything had been done out of love. And for that, June had forgiven her before she even uttered a word.

She even made for the birth of Elias.

Her reunion with Richard had been bittersweet; it seemed neither knew how to act now that everyone knew the truth. They were cordial but distant. Her mother had returned multiple times, and each time, things got a little easier between everyone. Though, Bodin didn't think the tension between her and Richard would ever fade.

The King of Forosse hadn't addressed it at all. Even when they went to Nortussa two years ago for the real festival, he barely spoke to them beyond a greeting that was undoubtedly for show. All forms of communication went through her brothers and mother. And everyone was fine with that. June had been more afraid of what he would do to her mother than anything, but he had carried on as normal, as if it didn't bother him in the slightest.

That hurt June, but she could pretend nearly as well as the man she once called father. It broke Bodin's heart that she felt the need to though.

"I've got him," Richard said, snapping Bodin back into the present. He gave June a look that Bodin couldn't decipher. "You two go have fun. It's your anniversary."

He carried Elias over to where her mother and Rafe now stood with Nadine, Iliana, and Delroy. As soon as he neared, the little boy reached for his grandmother with a grin. Richard handed him over with a smile of his own, always happy to share his time with their grandson when she was there.

When June had asked about naming him after Bodin's brother, Bodin had broken down in tears. It meant so much to him—to both of them.

Elias had started showing signs of light magic like June, but she also saw shadows swirling around him one night after he'd fallen asleep. It seemed he had both of their powers. They didn't quite know what that meant, but they would help him learn to control both to the best of their ability.

He was a part of all three kingdoms. He was the future of this realm, and he would serve as proof that light and dark could co-exist in peace. And Bodin couldn't wait to see what he did with it all.

Laurent's laughter caught Bodin's attention. The first time Bodin had brought his wife here, he promised they'd return some day with more people to truly celebrate. Each year since, they'd invited more and more to join them. Bodin had never expected to share his secret portals with anyone beyond his closest friends, but without the Ombrete haunting one, he didn't mind letting others enjoy the spaces from time to time.

"I know this is your favorite day and celebration…" Bodin pulled Juniper into his arms. "But will you come with me?"

She smiled. "Always."

Taking her hand, he led her away from the revelry and back to the palace. They walked out the door and to another. He paused outside the place he'd feared for so long. The place where he had almost lost June. He reached into his pocket and withdrew the twelfth key. Without hesitation, he handed it to her.

"What did you do?" She raised a brow but moved to unlock the door, not a shred of hesitation. Her trust in him never ceased to amaze him. He pushed it open and waited for her response.

Her loud gasp followed by her running inside made him chuckle. He trailed after her, closing the door and locking it so no one would disturb them. In their three years of marriage, they had learned to take these moments when they could. June had taken her past love of sneaking off to explore and turned it into sneaking off with him. She had a penchant for getting him riled up at the worst times, and he loved it. It had led to them having sex in several places around the palace. He could still perfectly remember when he got caught fucking her on his throne. She'd laughed until she cried.

Bodin wasn't one to share, but she seemed to thrive on the risk of someone catching them. And who was he to say no to her? He would do anything his wife asked.

Juniper spun around over and over as she looked in every direction. It was like she couldn't see everything in the cave fast enough. There was too much to take in at once.

"Bodin," she breathed. She took another step then yanked her foot back quickly. The soft, mossy floor glowed when she put her foot down again. With each step, it lit up beneath her in a brilliant shade of purple. It was another cave, but she seemed to love the other one so much that he wanted

to create an even more magical one. He'd started working on it months ago to surprise her with it today.

Along one side of the tunnel, the crystal wall glittered from the various colors of bioluminescence. Across from it, a stream trickled by. Bodin grabbed her by the waist to guide her to it, knowing she hadn't grasped what was in the water yet. Juniper sucked in another breath and knelt near the rocky ledge that served as a small barrier between the path and equally bioluminescent fish swimming beyond.

"I want to bring Elias next time, so I thought a little railing would be good," he said, putting a hand on her shoulder.

When she didn't say anything, he briefly worried if he'd done something wrong. Perhaps it wasn't high enough or she didn't like it after all. Then, he heard her quiet sniffling.

"June?" He squatted next to her, unsure what to do.

She turned toward him, the glowing cavern lighting up her smile. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she said, "It's perfect."

"There's more." Bodin pulled her to her feet but didn't let go. Nor did he move. He would wait here in this spot as long as she needed.

"More?"

"Mmhmm." He smoothed a hand down her hair, kissing her temple. "Want to see?"

Before she could answer, the sound of splashing reached them. Juniper pulled away to look down the tunnel, but she wouldn't be able to see the rest from here. Entwining their fingers, he led her farther into the cave.

They rounded the natural curve in the path, similar to the other cave, and she froze on the spot.

"Bodin," she repeated, her voice full of glee as she stared at the underground pond and its surroundings. The banks to the right spanned into the cave more, allowing space for furniture. He'd created a sitting area, but there were also two beds dotting the wall, along with a fireplace and table. They could live in here if they wanted.

The left-hand side was made up of a waterfall and several large boulders, and the stream turned into a river that flowed out the rear of the cave… allowing for the beautiful creatures currently lying on the boulders to swim in to visit.

"Mermaids?" June whispered, covering her mouth.

Bodin moved to stand behind her, enveloping her in a hug as he leaned down to rest his chin on her shoulder. “You said growing up you loved that fairy tale with the mermaids. So, I read it, looked at the sketches and paintings, and brought them to life for you.”

“I casually mentioned that once, years ago,” she said.

He squeezed her a little tighter. “I remember everything you tell me.”

Juniper spun in his arms, making him straighten, and put her palms on his chest. “Do you think they can leave for a little while? Because I need to tell you something now.”

“You don’t like them anymore?” His heart broke a little, but then she tilted her head with a furrowed brow.

“Of course I do; they’re *mermaids*.” She laughed. “It’s not that. But there is a huge bed over there that we’re probably going to make good use of after I tell you this, and I don’t want an audience.”

A million thoughts rushed through his mind in every direction. Closing his eyes, he reached for his magic. Because they were created by his imagination, he could communicate to them without speaking out loud. It was difficult, but he could do it. A splash sounded, followed by another and another, and soon, they were alone.

“Where are they going?” June asked.

He opened his eyes and glanced around to make sure he didn’t miss one. “The river leads out to an ocean. They have a home beyond this cave.”

Juniper looked at him in awe. “You created a home for them? Bodin, the details of this world…”

“I’ve been working on it for a while. I wanted it to be perfect. And creating living beings is tricky because I don’t want to need to control their every move. They need minds of their own.” He bent to kiss her. “At least with the basic skills to take care of themselves.”

June shook her head before tugging him back down into another kiss.

After a couple moments, she pulled away and headed toward the sitting area and makeshift bedroom. She went to the large bed against the cavern wall and then faced him, leaning back on her hands on the edge of the mattress. The soft mattress that was a replication of the one they usually shared in Gilarn when they visited Iliana.

Bodin slowly walked toward his wife, loving the way her lips curved up as she continued examining everything. When he neared, she said, “It’s pretty close to perfect.”

“Pretty close?” he asked with a deep chuckle. “What’s missing?”

She turned her head this way and that with a finger on her chin, as if considering as she looked around. Settling her gaze on the smaller bed nearby, she shrugged. “Well, we’re going to need another bed.”

He nearly tripped on his way to her. Was she saying what he thought she was?

Juniper met his gaze and put a hand on her stomach. “Not for a while though. We’ll need a cradle first.”

In two long strides, he was there, covering her mouth with his. He lifted her, and she wrapped her legs around his waist as he held her against him. Setting her on their bed, he speared his fingers through her long blond locks and deepened the kiss.

He pulled back, a smile breaking out across his face as he slid a hand to her cheek, a feeling of awe overtaking him. “You’re pregnant?”

Juniper nodded with tears in her eyes and a grin to match his. “And I had a dream that it was a little girl this time.”

His breath caught in his throat. He wanted more children, especially after seeing how close June was with her brothers and how well she’d done giving birth the first time. Elias needed siblings to play with, grow up with. But a little princess to spoil and protect… Bodin hadn’t even realized just how much he wanted that until now.

He hadn’t realized a lot of things before Juniper entered his life. As he kissed her once again, guiding her farther onto the bed and climbing up with her, he sent a silent thank you to the goddess for always watching over them.

A familiar warm breeze caressed the back of his neck in response.

Juniper had felt a connection to Ronna throughout her entire life, and after what happened that day on the battlefield so long ago, they knew it to be true. For some reason they may never know, Ronna had taken a special liking to Juniper. She’d set them on their paths toward one another, changing their fates.

But then again, it was impossible not to love this incredible woman, even without divine intervention. She lit up his entire world, bringing it to life after they’d both spent so long in the shadows.

And together, they had found love and happiness. Together, they had stopped a war, saved their kingdom, and brought new life into this world.

Together, they would live happily ever after.

The End

Thank you for reading Cursed by Darkness! I hope you enjoyed it. Please consider leaving a review. Even just a sentence or two helps! Here are a few links for you:

Amazon
Goodreads
Bookbub

PS - While this book is a standalone, I fell in love with the world and characters so much that I am planning a spin-off series down the road! Be sure to subscribe to my newsletter or follow me on social media for updates.

The Divine Battle

When the universe came to be, the King of Gods had three children. The eldest were twins: Theran, the God of Light, and Eryx, the God of Darkness. But it was their sister, Ronna, who truly held the power.

For millennia, Theran and Eryx fought amongst the stars. Some claim it was out of jealousy, others say it was because each wanted to take their father's place or earn his praise. The stories are often changed to fit the teller's motif. But the one consistent truth was that they could not agree on anything… save for the love they possessed for their sister.

From the time she came to be, the goddess Ronna knew she was different. Her father tried to instill upon her the importance of power and strength. To teach her that love was nothing but a weakness, he gave her and her brothers a world full of weak humans to control. Never could he have imagined the depths of her compassion toward them, or the lengths she would go to in order to protect them.

For a time, the three celestial siblings coexisted in a fragile peace. Theran and Eryx, however, were discontented to share this world. They each wanted full power over the lands and people. Their light and dark magic constantly at battle was what created night and day as we know it.

After centuries of enduring the twins' wrath against one another, Ronna erected a massive chain of mountains to separate the main continent, giving each brother half to control and leaving none for herself.

Theran ruled over Gilarn, shedding his light upon all those who lived there. Yet, within, he grew twisted and cruel. It was Eryx, with his shadows and darkness, who was gentler with his kingdom of Mesairla. And it was Eryx who gave Ronna her own portion of his lands to have as her own. Out of joy, she made Forosse a peaceful place that welcomed all.

Little did they know that small act would be their undoing.

Despite their tenuous peace, the gods had a secret. Each brother sprinkled a drop of their magic into the lake at the center of the continent in hopes of passing on their powers to the humans and taking full control. Ronna knew how important balance was, however, so she enchanted the lake to only allow those from the gods' respective kingdoms to gain their specific magic.

Therefore, those born in Mesairla could wield shadows, and Gilarnians possessed light.

The people cherished their gift of magic, but too soon, they also began fighting for more power. Neither kingdom was content, and so, they tried to claim the land surrounding the lake—the Valley of Stars, it came to be called.

Distraught at the humans' behavior and the way her brothers encouraged it, Ronna grew distant. She made sure those in her kingdom didn't have magic because she knew how it corrupted even the kindest of souls. And by keeping her people away from it, she managed to create a serene land where anyone could find sanctuary.

But it wasn't enough for her to find peace herself.

Centuries passed with generation after generation killing each other. The battle of light versus dark seemed never-ending, and Ronna couldn't ignore it anymore. In secret, she took the form of a woman, and with the help of her people who cherished unity above all else, she began to scheme. But in

her planning, she never took into account the one other thing humans seemed to fight over most… Love.

It wasn't easy for Ronna to give her heart away. She feared showing her love after being taught for a millennia that it was a weakness. But the man she'd grown to care for didn't believe that was her only reason for not letting him in. He accused her of thinking less of humans. Because how could a goddess love a simple man? Yet, he never gave up. He fought to be by her side, trying to show his worthiness.

Love, it turned out, was a weakness. Ronna had finally given in and married the human she cared for dearly, giving him half a dozen children. She had grown to cherish her life with them, ruling her peaceful kingdom as her brothers continued their war for power. She loved her husband, her children, and her people more than she ever thought possible. Which only made it that much more painful when it was all taken away.

In the dead of night, Ronna lost her husband first. Not by the war. Not by another's hands. It was illness and old age that took him. That was when the truth of her situation truly set in.

Ronna didn't age. But her new family did. Her children had grown, albeit at a slower rate than most humans due to the power she had passed down, and started families of their own, yet she still appeared as a young adult. The same as when she'd first taken a human form. And she realized in horror, that her loved ones would keep dying over and over for the rest of time, taking a piece of herself with each one.

When her daughter grew weathered and ill, Ronna gave in and went to her brother. She begged Theran to help her, to use his light to save her only remaining child. She pleaded with him, but he refused. So, she went to Eryx instead, to see if he could make her immortal like them. But he was no help either.

'Your daughter is old and gray,' he'd said. 'She has lived a full life. She has had her own children and grandchildren. It is time to let her go.'

In her grief, Ronna couldn't listen to reasoning. All she knew was that neither brother would help her. And that her father had been right. Love

was more powerful than magic, more dangerous. Magic could affect the body and world, but love changed the heart and soul.

Love could destroy everything.

In his distraction of trying to console his sister, Eryx hadn't realized Theran was watching. He'd always watched them in envy, not understanding their close bond. No matter how much she insisted she loved them both equally, Theran knew the truth. She would choose Eryx every time. And so, he made it his mission to destroy them both.

Everyone would fear the God of Light and his people.

To start his quest for dominance and revenge, Theran realized his first move would be to take control of the lake once and for all. He demanded ships be built directly on the edge of Lac de Rêves. Because of the small opening between the mountains that led to the enchanted waters, only a small crew could work on them. One at a time. It took years to finish three and then send troops over in multiple trips.

Years for the God of Light to grow angrier that his sister hadn't chosen him.

Theran ordered every able-bodied person over the age of twelve to Valétoi. With numbers on their side and the ability to heal with their light magic, they became a nearly invincible foe. But it didn't stop there. It wasn't enough for the god.

It was never enough.

Theran made a plan in secret. He continued sending forces toward the capital of Mesairla, wanting to destroy everything Eryx had built. And then, he went for the ultimate blow. He went after Ronna.

Theran's attack on Forosse was unexpected. Ronna never thought either brother would go that far. She fought to protect her people, and Eryx joined her side. But seeing the two allied only served to anger Theran more. He joined his army on the battlefield, using every bit of his might to defeat his siblings. He vowed to take them out so the world would finally be his.

The three siblings knew war. They'd seen it across different worlds between different species, but to insert themselves in such a manner was unheard of. And while the King of Gods did not approve, he did not stop them. For if they were foolish enough to behave as humans, they could stay among them until they remembered their place. Only then would they be welcome back to the stars.

Ronna and Eryx fought for their lives against Theran and his light dwellers. But Ronna didn't have magic like they did, that could be used in a war. Eryx used his shadows to block and push; it gave him and his people extraordinary strength. But Theran's army could heal over and over, and their light could shield against the darkness. No one could defeat those who didn't die.

At least, that was what the gods thought. For they too were thought to be immortal. Fighting in the battle wasn't a concern when they believed themselves invincible. But nothing is truly untouchable.

Not even a god.

Eryx hated his brother, but not enough to end his life. Not until Theran went after Ronna. She had never done anything to deserve his wrath. She'd fought for peace for so long, and this was how she was being repaid for it, apparently. And then, Theran did the unspeakable.

In the dead of night, he crept into the castle in Nortussa. And Ronna's remaining family, her descendants, were all slain by the God of Light.

Devastated by such tremendous loss and consumed by grief, Ronna gave in. She ordered her army to Valétoi to stand beside that of Mesairla. At her side, Eryx promised her vengeance. He vowed to fight to the death if that was what it took to defeat Theran.

And he kept that vow.

The battle lasted decades, lifetimes for most humans. But to the gods and goddess, it was the blink of an eye. The destruction of their people and world meant little to them anymore. All they cared about was power, just as their father had always intended.

When it became clear to the people that their gods no longer cared for them, most stopped fighting. The war faded into smaller and smaller battles until only the three siblings were left facing one another in the Valley of Stars.

There, day and night had their final battle.

Theran and Eryx fought as gods with all their might. The war of power caused great devastation throughout the realm with natural disasters, famine, and more death than the humans had ever seen. It went on and on until the slightest distraction turned the tides. In trying to help, Ronna accidentally drew Eryx's attention just long enough for Theran to strike.

Eryx fell to his brother's knees, and not one of them understood what was happening. A god was said to be unstoppable, immortal, but Eryx's life source bled from his human form as crimson pooled beneath him. For generations, people claimed they heard Ronna's screams around the world as she watched her favorite brother die.

Ronna thought she knew pain, but it was nothing compared to the loss of her brother. It tore away a piece of her very essence. But it also gave her something she never expected. Immense power to punish the one who hurt her.

With her power, Ronna found the strength to fight Theran. But when she went to attack, she realized he wasn't stopping her. He knelt beside his twin with a look of horror before glancing up at her and asking, "What have I done?"

Theran's guilt wasn't enough. Ronna wanted him to pay, to feel the agony she had endured for so long because of him. Realizing how strong her wrath was, Theran pleaded for mercy, but she would not hear it.

Ronna cursed her brother into the shadows. He would live among that which he'd fought for so long, trapped there for an eternity. For generations, the story changed and grew more elaborate until no one knew for certain what it would take to break the curse.

With one brother dead and the other banished to the shadows, Ronna had no one left. Her will to fight had disappeared, along with her desire to rule her kingdom and this world.

Wanting to be free of it all, Ronna took to the stars. She gave the humans their world to do with as they wished.

For she no longer cared what happened.

With the gods and goddess gone from their world, the humans returned to their lives. But the time of peace did not last. They soon realized that the lake still gave magic to those who drank from its waters. And the valley was the only area of land that gave access to it easily. Both kingdoms surrounding it wanted control of Valétoi, and so they returned to war.

The fear between the two magics had grown when Theran killed Eryx. Those with light were seen as vicious, despite the fact that their power was not harmful by nature. And those with shadows were seen as sneaky and vengeful. Neither side wanted to give in. Neither side could learn to trust.

But every once in a while, a ruler would come about and try to negotiate peace. It would last for a time, but eventually, the need for control would reclaim the lands and people, and the battle began anew.

And as the human wars raged on, Ronna slept in the heavens above…

While Theran lurked in the shadows, waiting to return to the light.

Waiting to take back what was stolen from him.

Pronunciation Guide

Most of the names and locations in this book are exactly as they look, but in case one is curious, here is the way they are intended to sound:

Forosse = fer-oh-ss
Mesairla = mess-air-la
Gilarn = gill-arn
Valétoi = val-ay-twah
Lac de Rêves = lock-deh-rev
Kehlir = ku-leer
Nortussa = nor-too-suh
Ronna = ron-uh
Theran = th-air-en (light th)
Eryx = air-icks
Laurent = lore-ahn-t
Moreau = mer-oh
Iliana = ill-ee-ahn-uh
Inaya = in-aye-uh
Lumen = lew-men
Noxian = nocks-ee-en
Ombrete = om-br-eet

Acknowledgments

I have so many people to thank for supporting me throughout writing this book.

First and foremost, a massive shoutout to Ali Fields for alpha AND beta reading it while I was writing and editing. I still cannot believe you read it twice in a row to help me, and I cannot say thank you enough. I had grown so stuck with this book, and I honestly almost gave up on it. But then, you started reading, and your feedback made all the difference. It didn't just help flesh out parts of the plot, it encouraged me to keep going. And because of you, this book is now my favorite.

Thank you to my other alpha readers, Jenny Gardner and Brittany Koller. Your feedback and encouragement, not to mention your constant support and friendship, means the absolute world to me.

A HUGE thank you to Heather Dowell for keeping me sane during this stressful time. Between helping me as a PA, a business partner, and a proofreader, you made this possible. But more importantly, just being there at all times as my best friend got through the rough patches.

Leah Miller, proofreader extraordinaire and BFF, thank you for keeping me on task and always catching my typos. You have no idea how much I appreciate having you in my life.

Rachel Theus Cass, thank you for working with me on such a frantic schedule and constantly reminding me things would get done and work out. They did, and that's largely because of you. Your edits really helped me dive into the feels more, and your comments never failed to make me smile.

To the entire Once Upon a Curse set, you're all rock stars. I'm so grateful to be a part of this collection. It's been an incredible experience, and I've loved working with you all.

To the massive number of people who joined the ARC and PR team… words cannot adequately express how thankful I am for each of you. I've never been a part of something this big, and it's been amazing to see all the love and support from so many readers.

There is no way to name everyone who helped with this book in some way or another, so please know, if I didn't list you, I'm still grateful for you!

Also by CM Haines

For all books, go to: caitmarieh.com

VEIL OF MOONLIGHT

A Crimson Fate

A Cursed Slumber

Book 3 Title TBA

Book 4 Title TBA

LOVE HUNTERS

The Wrong Brother

The Right Man

Book 3 Title TBA

Book 4 Title TBA

STANDALONES

Cursed by Darkness

About the Author

From steamy romance to fantasy, and everything in between, CM Haines simply loves stories. She lives in Indiana, spending most days in her home office that's slowly becoming her own library. Apart from writing, she offers a variety of author services and continues to book blog. She has a BA in forensic psychology and an MFA in creative writing, both from Southern New Hampshire University. When she's not working with books in one way or another, she enjoys music, bullet journaling, and Disney movies. She also has several young adult novels under Cait Marie.

Find CM Haines online:
Join CM's Facebook Group
Sign up for CM's Newsletter
Website